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MITHRAS, THE SECRET GOD

MITHRAS,
THE SECRET GOD

By

M. J. Vermaseren

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Preface

IN Rome, about A.D. 400, a number of Christians, armed with axes, forced their way into a Mithraic temple on the Aventine, where they smashed the sculptures and cut gaping holes in the paintings. Once the persecuted, they were now the persecutors, and to their ever-growing numbers Mithras and his followers were regarded as deadly rivals.

The origins of the worship of Mithras can be traced back to the central Iranian plateau, and Mithras worshippers existed also in India at a comparatively early date. Thence the cult spread to Asia Minor, crossing into Europe in the first century B.C. In the East, Mithras was an attendant of the good and righteous god, a deity of light, identified with the sun, while in the West he was the focal point of a secret cult. We learn from many sources that in the mysteries attached to his cult the initiates partook of a meal which the early Fathers of the Church compared with the Eucharist. This gives but one indication of the great historical importance of Mithras, and anyone who wishes to understand the development of early Christianity must know something of Mithras, the god whose influence penetrated into the imperial court of Rome and who also reigned in the hearts of simple people, countrymen and townsfolk alike.

What was the content of his teaching and what were the ceremonies of his cult? What place did he occupy in the contemporary world? This book tries to answer these questions, although all too often the picture must remain

blurred and indistinct. Nevertheless, for two thousand years the name of Mithras commanded reverence and respect, and if only for this reason the god of mystery is worthy of our study.

I

Mithras in India and Iran

IN 1907 a large number of clay tablets was found in the palace archives of Boghazköy, the capital of the ancient Hittites in the north of the Anatolian plateau. These tablets contain the first recorded mention of the name 'Mitra', who, together with the Lord of Heaven, is invoked as the protector of a treaty between the Hatti (the Hittites) and their neighbours, the Mitanni. The date of the treaty is somewhere in the fourteenth century B.C., and since the latest known reference to the Western Mithras occurs in the fifth century A.D. these tablets show that the god was revered for nearly two thousand years.

Mithras is of course worshipped no longer, but archaeologists, historians of religion, theologians and linguists alike have pondered his nature and tried to unravel the secrets of his cult for the light which these studies have to throw on the origins of Christianity.

One insurmountable difficulty confronts the student of the Mithraic mysteries. For the Eastern form of Mithraism practically nothing except documentary evidence exists, whereas the Mithras of the Roman world is known to us almost exclusively from non-literary sources. That brilliant scholar, Franz Cumont, who died in 1947, has neatly summed up the position in his *Die Mysterien des Mithra*: 'It is,' he writes, 'as if it were only possible to study Christianity through the Old Testament and the mediaeval cathedrals.' Because of this great gap, the story of Mithras is bound to be incomplete and distorted, and those who wish to read it must wait for and assimilate the fresh discoveries which are made year by year.

The early Hittite treaty from Boghazköy proves that some of the first Indo-Europeans had already adopted Mithras into their religious system, and so it is no surprise to find references to him in documents from early India as well as Iran. In the Veda, the sacred writings of India, he occurs frequently as 'Mitra', literally 'treaty'; in the Avesta, the holy book of the Persians, he is called 'Mithra' and a *yasht*, a special hymn of praise, is dedicated to him. Both in the Veda and the Avesta, Mitra is associated with the supreme being, Varuna or Ahura-Mazda, and shares their attributes, but different concepts of his nature have to be distinguished in these writings, since they combine sources of considerable antiquity with later material. Consequently Mithra does not always appear in the same character, and interpretations of him vary from time to time. Scholars who are familiar with these Eastern texts agree that in the early period Mithra was held in such honour that he competed for the crown with the lord of heaven.

To understand the place of Mithra in Iran it is necessary to keep in mind the division of the Persian pantheon into two major groups. On the one hand are the deities associated with Ahura-Mazda, the all-wise, who rules over the sublime realm of light, while on the other are the powers associated with Ahriman, the god of darkness. The two groups are in continual opposition to each other, but there will come a day when the forces of good will conquer the forces of evil. In this struggle Mithra has the status of a *yazata*, that is to say, an ally. He fights in the ranks of the good and righteous. He is a god of light, who in India was already regarded as the sun. Like the Homeric Helios he is all-seeing, and so an avenger of injustice and of everything in opposition to the ordained pattern of the universe.

In one sense, therefore, Mithra is a god of the element of light, and in another he has a place in the cult of Ahura-Mazda; he is an extension of the idea of the supreme god from whom he takes his actual being. Just as the supreme god himself is surrounded by attendant powers, *Amesha Spentas*, who strictly speaking constitute his being, so the Indian Mitra also has lesser divinities around him, such as Aryaman, 'the protector of the destiny of the Aryans', and Bhaga, 'providence', who dispenses fortune. In ancient Persia these two attendant figures survive as Sraoša and Aši and are to be identified with the two followers of Mithras who appear in the much later mysteries as Cautes and Cautopates (see below, p. 72).

Belief in the great power of Mithra was called in question by Zarathustra or Zoroaster, the great prophet who worked mainly in Eastern Iran and who lived some time between 1000 and 600 B.C. (The exact date is very widely disputed, but in the present state of our knowledge the latter date is the more probable.) It is a major drawback that his character has largely to be reconstructed from the *Gathas*, devotional hymns attributed to the prophet and written in an archaic and abstruse Eastern Iranian dialect which is extremely difficult to translate. It is, however, an established fact that Zarathustra was a great reformer, who attempted to transform the established polytheism into a monotheist pattern with Ahura-Mazda as the sole and supreme god, and so found himself obliged to relegate Mithra to the background. He also attacked the forms of worship of his time, forbidding blood sacrifices such as the bull-offering and denying to his followers the ecstatic enjoyment of the spirituous Haoma. This measure in particular dealt a heavy blow to the Mithra cult, for Mithra was (as we shall see) closely

associated with the bull, whose blood, mixed with the Haoma, bestowed immortality.

Whether or not his teaching was subsequently accepted by rulers of the Achaemenid dynasty such as Darius and Xerxes, it is clear that Zarathustra never succeeded in entirely suppressing the popular feeling for Mithra. At the very beginning of his career the poet-prophet experienced strong opposition which was to lead to his eventual murder in a temple. Thus in subsequent writings of the Avesta, in the tenth hymn for example, Mithra is reinstated in all his glory. This *yasht* breathes the true spirit of the popular cult, and the prophet's influence is only to be seen dimly when the all-wise God speaks to Spitama Zarathustra: 'When I created grass-land magnate Mithra, O Spitamid, I made him such in worthiness to be worshipped and prayed to as myself, Ahura Mazdah' (Yasht x, 1). Other passages from the tenth hymn speak for themselves:

You protect the countries in the same measure in which they strive to take care of grass-land Mithra; you destroy the countries to the same extent to which they are defiant.

I invoke you for assistance: may he join us for assistance, Mithra the strong, notorious splendid, master of countries, worthy to be worshipped, worthy to be prayed to! (Yasht x, 78)

I will worship Mithra, who is good, strong, supernatural, foremost, merciful, incomparable, high-dwelling, a mighty strong warrior. Valiant, he is equipped with a well-fashioned weapon, he who watches in darkness, the undeceivable. He is what (is) mightiest among the very mighty, he is what (is) strongest among the very strong; he has by far the greatest insight among the gods. Fortune attends him, the valiant, who with his thousand ears and ten thousand eyes is the strong, all-knowing, undeceivable master of ten thousand spies. (Yasht x, 170-171)

Throughout the whole of this *yasht* there are references to Mithra's power, his greatness, and his readiness to fight, which specially endeared him to his followers and remained among his attributes for as long as he was honoured. In later centuries, too, these particular qualities inspired the votaries of the Mithraic mysteries.

In Indian writings such as the Veda (which is divided into sections like the Avesta) Mithra again appears as the attendant of the Lord of Heaven, Varuna. He is closely connected with the power of light and the sun, which is itself called 'the eye of Mitra and Varuna'. The connection between Mitra and the bull—which later became the focal point of the Mithras cult (see p. 67)—is perhaps even clearer in the Veda than in the Avesta. Thanks to Professor H. Lommel, a number of Vedic texts have been translated and can, so he believes, be associated with Mithras, the bull-slayer. Lommel's starting-point is the god of life, Soma, who is the same as Haoma and represents the rain which springs from the moon. He gives life to plants and so nourishes human beings and animals alike. In creatures of the male sex the sap of the plant is changed into fertile seed, in the female to milk. At death the life so given returns again to the moon and during the waxing of the moon Soma recovers this life force, refilling himself as if he were a bowl and so becoming the gods' monthly potion of immortality. In the myth Soma, as rain, is both the semen of the sacred bull who fertilises the earth, and the milk of the all-nourishing heavenly cow. The gods, wishing to partake of the potion because of its gift of immortality, devise a plan to murder the Soma-plant which is in fact Soma himself. The Wind-god Vayu agrees and Mitra too is invited to become an accomplice in the murder. The gods speak to Mitra ('he, whose name

means "friend" '): ' "We wish to kill King Soma." He said: "Not I, for I am friend to all." They said to him "Still we will slay him." ' In the end Mithra, having been promised a share in the sacrifice, assists in the murder after all, but as a result he runs the risk of losing his ascendancy over the cattle, for the beasts turn against him with the words: 'Though he is friend (Mitra) he has done a terrible deed.' Even Varuna takes a hand in the killing of Soma, who is murdered by being crushed under a weight of stones as in one of the cult ceremonies when the juice is extracted from the stem of the Soma-plant.

Soma supplies the life blood and the drink which is enjoyed by gods, priests and participants in the rite. Thus man is granted immortality, though through the agency of death from which only the gods are exempt.

It is interesting to compare the evidence of the Veda with that of the Avesta and particularly with the group of texts called the Bundahishn, in which the archetypal bull is killed and then the plants are created (see p. 68). In the later Mithras cult the god Soma-Haoma no longer appears, but tradition preserved the killing of the bull and its resultant gift of resurrection and so the connection between the Indo-Iranian cult of Mit(h)ra and the Western myth of Mithras the bull-slayer was preserved.

2

Zarathustra and the Magi

Later sources purport to describe how Zarathustra, when he lay dying in the fire temple of Balkh, said to his assassin: 'May Ahura-Mazda forgive you even as I do.'

These words, whether historical or not, show how the prophet was revered, and later writings also ascribe to him attributes which have led to comparisons with Christ (see p. 104). Although his teachings did not take root in Iran, his influence is noticeable in many respects, and in the texts his name is always mentioned with due deference. In fact, it is his very name which gives the writings their authority.

Zarathustra was a Magus (the dark practices of which Pliny accused the 'Magi' should be discounted). According to the Persian scholar G. Messina, S. J., the word *magu* means a person who takes part in the gifts (*maga*), that is to say the religious teachings of Ahura-Mazda. *Magu* originally indicated a Mazda-worshipper, and Zarathustra is to be regarded as the first Magus because it was to him that the All-Wise revealed his teaching when, according to Dio Chrysostom (*Or.*, 36, 40-41), the prophet spoke to the god on a burning mountain. Zarathustra was a priest and singer poet, who became a prophet and a reformer.

Gradually, however, the word Magus came to mean priest in a general sense, but it does not follow that Zarathustra was a pure Mazdaist. The Magi were the wise men of the Persian court, where they enjoyed great influence. They were the tutors of the crown princes, and Cicero (*De Div.*, I, 41, 90) even went so far as to say that only those who had been taught by the Magi could ascend the throne. The high standing of the Magi was the cause of the adventures of the treacherous Smerdis, amusingly described by Herodotus (III, 61 *seq.*). The palace revolution by which Smerdis (or Bardiya) seized the throne during Cambyses' absence has been interpreted as an attempt by the Magi to seize power in order to accelerate

the spread of Zarathustra's teaching. Herodotus (I, 101), however, thought the Magi were one of the six tribes of the Medes and in that case the attempted coup would be a purely political affair. On this theory Benveniste explains the actions of Cambyses' successor, Darius, who massacred the Magi in revenge, an act which he celebrated in the official decree inscribed on the rocks of Behistun. It seems that the priests were chosen from the tribe of the Magi, but not every Magus was a priest. This also offers some explanation for the custom of giving the dead to wild animals and birds (a rite typical of the northern Medes) instead of burying them.

In spite of these events the Magi were greatly respected by the common people. According to Herodotus (I, 132) no sacrifice could be made without the Magi who, during the ceremony, sang of the birth of the gods. A relief of the fifth century B.C. from Dascylium in the west of Asia Minor gives a clear picture of the Magi's activities (Fig. 1). With a cloth (*pâdam*) in front of the mouth, so as not to contaminate the fire with their breath, and a bundle of rods (*baresman* or *barsom*) in the hand, they stand in front of a lofty niche or altar on which hang the heads of a ram and a bull.

With the extension of the Persian Empire the Magi were scattered throughout Asia Minor and they came into contact with the local priestly castes, especially the so-called 'Chaldeans', and became at the same time better acquainted with Hellenic culture. According to tradition, the Magus Ostanes spread the Persian dogma in Greece, thus bringing the philosophy of the Magi and the philosophy of Greece into contact with one another. Some writers hold that the concept of μαγεία is the same as the cult of the gods θεῶν θεραπεία (Plato, *Alcib.*, I, 121), but

according to a more popular idea already encountered in Sophocles, *μάγος* became a synonym for *γοητής* (magician). This evolution of the meaning of the word Magi

Fig. 1. Magi on a relief at Dascylium, 5th century B.C.

shows how the contact between Magi and Chaldeans produced in its turn a strong influence on the Greek world by way of astrology, a subject for which the Chaldean priests were justly renowned. These Hellenised Magi in Asia Minor must have been the priests who founded the worship of Mithras and made the universally revered god the focal point of a mystery cult. The rites associated with the god were known all over Asia Minor. At the *Mithrakana* solemn sacrifices were held, and the king took part in sacred dances and drank himself into a stupour in honour of the god. The account of this ceremony by Ctesias (*c.*

390 B.C.) is confirmed by other sources: the celebrations took place on the day of Mihr in the month of Mihr, that is October 2nd, the day winter began.

The Magi placed Mithras in his rôle as sun-god in the foreground of their theology; according to them Zervan was at the head of the two conflicting powers of Good and Evil. It was a sacred tradition of the Magi to pass on their priesthood from father to son, and in this connection an inscription in both Greek and Aramaic is of particular importance. It was found in Farasha or Rhodandos in Cappadocia and reads: 'Sagarios, son of Magapharnes [or Maipharnes the name is disputed], general of Ariaramneia, became Magus of Mithras', or (according to a more acceptable decipherment) 'conducted a ceremony for Mithras'. Unfortunately it is difficult to give an exact date to this inscription; some authorities have attributed it to the third century B.C. while others favour a time about the beginning of our era. In any case the Magi were settled for many centuries in provinces of Asia Minor, and Strabo himself (XV, 3, 14), who lived from 66 B.C. to A.D. 24, mentions having seen them. His account reads almost like a description of the relief from Dascylium (Fig. 1) which dates from the fifth century B.C.: 'They sing for long periods with a bundle of fine tamarisk in their hands.'

The mysteries of Mithras were known in the first century B.C. to the pirates of Cilicia, but at the same time Mithras was still worshipped with simple, ordinary homage, outside the secret sects (see p. 27). The transformation of these observances into a regular cult probably took place in the last two centuries B.C.

Since the recent discoveries in the excavations at Dura-Europos in Syria it is impossible to deny, as the Swedish scholar Wikander has recently done, the powerful in-

fluence of the Magi of Asia Minor on the formation of the Mithras cult. On the side walls of the cult room in the Dura-Europos Mithraeum (see plate opposite p. 32) two Magi are shown attired in their distinctive robes. They are solemnly seated on a throne, their richly embroidered garb consisting of a cloak, long trousers and a pointed cap. One of the Magi holds in his right hand a wooden staff and in his left hand a roll. His serious expression indicates that he is the wise man who teaches the secrets of the mysteries. A certain Hegomonius (who lived some time before A.D. 350) gives a description of the prophet Mani (A.D. 216-176) dressed in the costume of the Magi: 'He wore a colourful blueish cloak; in his hand a solid ebony staff, under his arm a Babylonian book.' Mani's dress is similar to that of the Magi priests.

In the Mithraeum of Santa Prisca in Rome the enthroned figure of the Father or Head of the Community is depicted. He is dressed in a red garment, such as Mithras himself wore, and the red pointed cap. He wears a ring on his right hand. The staff, the cap and the ring are also represented as attributes of the Father on a mosaic at Ostia (p. 135). Moreover, an inscription at Dura-Europos mentions a certain Maximus as a Magus (using the actual word *magus*). There was in fact one incident when the Magi personally set foot on Roman soil. In A.D. 66 Tiridates I, King of Armenia, set his mind on being crowned by Nero, and his voyage took him overland through Thrace, Illyria and thence to Picenum, for as Magus he would not pollute the sacred element of water. He arrived in Naples after a triumphal tour of nine months and then proceeded to Rome. For the Romans his entry into the city was a magnificent spectacle of Eastern splendour. Tiridates was accompanied by three thousand Parthian

horsemen and there were also Magi in his retinue (*magos secum adduxerat*).

During the coronation ceremony (referred to by Dio Cassius, IXIII, 1-7; Suetonius, *Nero*, 13, 30; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, XXX, 1, 6), Tiridates turned to Nero with these words: 'I am the ruler, descendant of Arsakos, of the kings Vologeses and Pakoros, his brother, but I am your slave [see p. 178] and I came to you, my Lord, to worship you, as it were Mithras; and I will be such as you grant me to be, because you are to me the *Moira* and the *Tyche*.') Upon this Tiridates took off his coronet and placed it on the Emperor's head. Cumont associated this investiture with the Mithras cult into which Tiridates wanted to initiate Nero. Once more Pliny provides the evidence for this: 'he had initiated him in a magic repast' (*magicisque cenis initiaverat*)—a repast which must refer to the Mithraic 'eucharist' (see p. 98). If this is so, we have an indication that Nero was the first Roman Emperor to come into contact with the cult of Mithras. Nero, we know, was deeply interested in the occult and he may have hoped that the Magi would enlighten him still further in the strange practices of the East. Furthermore, Nero insisted on being worshipped as the Sun-god and in his Golden House (the *Domus Aurea*) whose garden contained an enormous statue of himself as the Sun-god, he fancied that he lived like a sun-king. During the festivities in honour of Tiridates a purple cloth was, it is reported, stretched over the Theatre of Pompey on the *Campus Martius* on which Nero was painted, seated in a sun-chariot surrounded by golden stars. However that may be, it is certainly established that for some ten years the Mithras cult had a foothold in Rome (see p. 29).

Christianity too made its first appearance in Rome at

about this time. In the new teachings, Jesus, as the Redeemer and Messiah, descended upon earth in human form and the Gospels record how, at his birth, the Magi

Fig. 2. Mithras riding on a bull

arrived in Bethlehem, guided by a star, and worshipped the Christ-child and gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2). Messina has shown that certain groups of Jews were interested in Zarathustra and even put him on the same level as Ezekiel or regarded him as a pupil of Elias. In their turn the Magi applied themselves to the teachings of the Jewish faith. Though the Christians knew that Zarathustra was not a Jew, they nevertheless conceived him as a prophet who served God by heralding the coming of the Messiah. And so we read in the Arabian version of the Gospel: 'See, the Magi come from the East to Jerusalem as prophesied by Zarathustra.' According to the Christian writers this Messiah is indisputedly the same as Jesus. But in the Persian Avesta he is the Saushyant, who in the course of many millennia will appear at the end of time, when the realm of Truth and Good will triumph over Evil with his aid. He is the victorious Messiah who, 'when the dead rise again, when the

living have become immortal, will make life glorious' (Zamyad *yasht*, 19, 89). According to the Bahman *yasht* (III, 31), another hymn from the Avesta, Mithras is the main adversary of these evil powers. It is believed that Peshotanu will overcome impiety, and Ahura-Mazda instructs his attendants, commanded by Mithras, to assist him in this. The new reign of the Sun-god has now begun. And then when the dead have risen from their graves, the Saushyant will, according to the Bundahishn (xxx, 25) slay a magnificent bull and make a potion of immortality for mankind from its fat, mixed with the Haoma juice.

This Messiah is represented in the Western mysteries by none other than the Sun-god Mithras himself. A Latin inscription from Rome says: 'hail to the Saushyant' (*nama Sebesio*), while a Manichean document found in Turkestan adds another special feature. In contrast with the true Mithras is a false deity who rides on a bull (see plate opposite p. 33 and p. 113) and pretends to be the 'true son of God'. He commands men to worship him.

In the Bundahishn (xxx, 10) the powers of Good and Evil are to be separated after the final battle and Mithras is one of three who pass judgment on the soul when, according to the Avesta, the dead arrive at the bridge Cinvât. But at the end of time Mithras will guide the souls through a blazing stream which can harm only the evil ones. The early Christians saw in the Magi's anticipation of the Messiah's coming a confirmation of their own belief and so allowed them to worship their Saviour. It is hardly to be wondered at that some centuries later Mithras was regarded as a kind of Anti-Christ.

3

The Arrival of Mithras in Europe

The circumstances which brought the god at last to Europe after hundreds of years are indeed strange. According to the historian Plutarch, who lived in the first century A.D., the Romans became acquainted with Mithras through pirates from Cilicia, a province of Asia Minor. These were the pirates who constituted such a threat to Rome until Pompey drove them from the seas.

In his biography of this skilful general, Plutarch writes of the pirates: 'They brought to Olympus in Lycia strange offerings and performed some secret mysteries, which exist still in the cult of Mithras, first made known by them [the pirates]'. In the middle of the second century A.D. the historian Appian adds that the pirates came to know of the mysteries from the troops who were left behind by the defeated army of Mithridates Eupator. It is well established that all kinds of Eastern races were represented in that army.

There are some well-known monuments associated with Mithras in the pirates' homeland in the mountainous regions of Cilicia, and recently an altar was discovered in Anazarbos which had been consecrated by Marcus Aurelius as 'Priest and Father of Zeus-Helios-Mithras'. The god was also worshipped in Tarsus, the capital of the province, as we know from coins of the Emperor Gordian III which bear a picture of the bull-slayer (Fig. 3). One of the greatest campaigns against the Persians took place during the reign of Gordian III; the coin has propaganda value as Ernest Will has pointed out: 'L'hommage rendu au dieu perse adopté par Rome, au moment de la cam-

pagne contre sa patrie première, revêt une valeur politique particulière.'

But can this evidence from the second and third cen-

Fig. 3. Coin with bull-slayer from Tarsus, minted in the reign of Gordian III

turies A.D. be taken as a confirmation of Plutarch's remarks about the Cilician pirates of the first century B.C.? Probably it can. The fact that representations of the bull-slayer occur on coins from Tarsus, through which Gordian III almost certainly passed on his way to battle, is evidence that Mithras was worshipped in this town in particular. Since Tarsus was situated at a road junction it is probable that its citizens became acquainted with the Mithraic cult at quite an early date. Plutarch, moreover, relates that the pirates committed outrages against the gods on Olympus where Hephaistos was worshipped. As devotees of the Eastern god they apparently felt little respect for the gods of the Greeks.

The pirates, a group of drifting adventurers and, occasionally, fallen noblemen, conducted a communal worship of Mithras, whose cult was an exclusively male one. It is quite possible that these pirates introduced the Mithraic mysteries into Italy after their defeat and subsequent transportation there by Pompey. This event then offers a

terminus post quem for the spread of the Mithras mysteries. Other early evidence of the first decades B.C. refers only to the reverence paid to Mithras without mentioning the mysteries; examples which may be quoted are the tomb inscriptions of King Antiochus I of Commagene at Nemrud Dagh, and of his father Mithridates at Arsameia on the Orontes. Both kings had erected on vast terraces a number of colossal statues seated on thrones to the honour of their ancestral gods. At Nemrud we find in their midst King Antiochus (69-34 B.C.) and in the inscription Mithras is mentioned together with Zeus-Ahura-Mazda, Hermes, Apollo-Helios and Herakles-Verethragna. Thus Persian gods were invoked as protectors of the royal house. Both Mithridates and his son were represented in reliefs clasping hands with Mithras. Yearly feasts were held in honour of the deceased kings. But the inscriptions do not say anything about a secret cult of Mithras; the god simply takes his place beside the acknowledged state gods.

Though Plutarch's information is important, it must be borne in mind that the historian wrote his life of Pompey at the end of the first century A.D. and it is not until then that we actually find in Rome the characteristic representation of Mithras as bull-slayer. The poet Statius (*fl. c.* A.D. 80) describes Mithras as one who 'twists the unruly horns beneath the rocks of a Persian cave'. One other point worthy of note is that no Mithraic monument can be dated earlier than the end of the first century A.D., and even the extensive investigations at Pompeii, buried beneath the ashes of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, have not so far produced a single image of the god. There is therefore a complete gap in our knowledge between 67 B.C. and A.D. 79. The earliest datable monument is a statue from Rome, now in the British Museum; the inscription mentions a certain

Alcimus, who calls himself the servant of T. Claudius Livianus, and, if the identification of this Livianus with the commander of the Praetorian Guard under the emperor Trajan is correct, then the figure must date from the beginning of the second century A.D. From this period onwards, the trail blazed by Mithras is broad and clear; the god's cult becomes firmly established and traces are found even on the Capitol and the Palatine, the heart of Imperial Rome.

4

The Followers of Mithras

It has already been explained that in Iran Mithras had a militant character, always ready for battle, prepared to assist others in their fight for good and to bring them victory. One of the grades in the mysteries was called *Miles*, the soldier. The Mithraic cult was a form of military service; life on earth a campaign led by the victorious god. It is therefore little wonder that soldiers of all ranks in the Roman legions, orientals included, felt the lure of Mithras. Observance of the cult guaranteed assistance to all who pledged their lives to the Roman eagle. The assurance of divine aid on the battlefield, the military discipline and the taking of an oath as part of that discipline, were very important factors in the spread of the Mithras cult and its official recognition. Material evidence from the second century A.D. shows that wherever the Romans planted the standards, Mithras and his cult followed. M. Valerius Maximianus is a case in point. He was born at Poetovio (the modern Pettau or Ptuj) in the province of

Dalmatia, now north-western Yugoslavia, where there were three large Mithraic temples, and as commander of the Thirteenth Legion (Legio XIII Gemina) he consecrated an altar in a Mithraeum at Apulum (Alba Julia in Dacia, modern Rumania). Subsequently as commander of the Third Legion (Legio III Augusta) between the years A.D. 183 and 185 he consecrated altars at Lambaesis in Numidia. There is throughout a strong connection between the Danubian provinces, where the Mithras cult is widespread in the outposts, and Africa. Evidence of Mithraism can be found at Troesmis in Moesia and also in Sitifs (Setif) in Africa, both places where the Second Legion (Legio II Herculia) was stationed at different times. M. Aurelius Sabinus, who came from Carnuntum (Deutsch-Altenburg) east of Vindobona (Vienna), where Mithras enjoyed profound reverence, consecrated as commander an altar at Lambaesis, and L. Sextius Castus, a centurion of the Sixth Legion, who was in all probability of African origin, erected a Mithraic altar at Rudchester.

The pattern of the soldiers following the legions, the legions following the orders of their commanders and the Mithras cult following the army is continually repeated. An inscription from Palaeopolis on the island of Andros shows how military service led to initiation. During the occupation of this island, when troops were being transported to the East for Septimius Severus' expedition about A.D. 200, M. Aurelius Rufinus dedicated a cave to Mithras. Rufinus was a select member (*evocatus*) of the Praetorian Guard and as such he is also mentioned on an inscription found at Siscia in Bulgaria, in which it is recorded that he was a native of Bizye in Thrace. From examination of the extant evidence we know that in these Balkan regions Mithraism did not extend south of Bessa-

para and Philippopolis. Rufinus therefore received his Mithraic initiation in his native district, but only while on military service, most probably in those regions where he served before joining the Praetorian cohorts. In Rome itself there was a Mithraeum close to the *castra praetoria*, paid for in all likelihood by public subscription, but erected for the benefit of the Praetorian cohorts.

There were also followers of the Eastern god to be found among the cavalry (*equites*) and bowmen (*sagittarii*) of the Roman army. Mithras the invincible was in a special degree the protector and patron of archers since he was himself the divine archer, who had power to shoot water from barren rocks with his arrows; a Roman relief shows that he possessed a bow from birth. Again, he was conceived as the Rider-god whose aim was so unfailing that his arrows never missed the gazelle or the wild boar. Palmyrene archers at Dura-Europos represented him on two paintings in their sanctuary as a mounted huntsman armed with bow and arrow (Fig. 28). In Germany (for example at Dieburg and Rückingen) there are other representations of the god hunting, attended by a pack of Molossian hounds. On a relief from Neuenheim he is shown as a powerful ruler riding a horse and holding the *globus* in his right hand (Fig. 27).

Although Mithras enjoyed considerable respect amongst the inhabitants of coastal towns, it was not by sailors that his teachings were spread to these places, nor are there many inscriptions set up by followers serving with the Roman fleets, in spite of the fact that he is known to have gained the gratitude of those engaged in commerce and navigation. The importance of the main land routes, ports and rivers was to facilitate the transport of troops and merchandise, but at the same time the great rivers formed

A Magus; painting from Dura-Europos

Cult-niche of the Mithraeum under the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome

a natural defence line and *castra* or *castella*, bigger or smaller fortresses, were often established along them before civilian settlements. The remains of these defence lines (*limes*) are to be found along the Euphrates, in Africa, in Dacia and Moesia along the Danube, in Germany along the sinuous course of the Rhine and in Britain between the Solway and Tyne, where Hadrian constructed a *vallum* or wall against the hostile Picts—and in all these places evidence of the Mithras cult is to be found, in the most distant outposts and in the furthest corners of the empire. In the Crimea on the Black Sea, at an important crossroads, it is recorded that *beneficiarii* (soldiers with special privileges) erected a Mithraeum, although the exact site is as yet unknown. In the last ten years Mithraea have been discovered at Rudchester and Carrawburgh, while the Walbrook Mithraeum in London shows a certain general similarity to the sanctuary at Merida in Spain and to another in Rome, on the Aventine below the present church of Santa Prisca. A follower of Mithras living in the Jewish quarter of Rome on the far side of the Tiber owned property in Ostia, where he had his name engraved on an altar dedicated to the god. At Dieburg and Stockstadt in Germany there are Mithraea containing statues of Mercury with his purse, a form less unusual in the East (e.g. at Commagene) where Mithras was occasionally invoked in the same breath with Hermes-Mercury.

However much human beings differ in character, rank and position, in a religious community all become united. In many Mithraea we come across expressions of simple popular faith side by side with the expansive dedications of the high and mighty. Some votaries are known to us by name, such as Jahribol, commander of the archers

(στρατηγός τοξοτῶν) who had himself portrayed at Dura-Europos on the great bull-slaying relief making a sacrifice in the company of two distinguished acquaintances (see plate opposite p. 113). Mareinos or Mareos, who executed the paintings in this sanctuary, scratched his name on one of the columns. It is a matter for speculation whether this talented artist was paid for his work or whether he gave his services for nothing. In the Aventine Mithraeum the followers of the god were shown in procession offering their gifts. They were mainly people of Eastern origin, as is evident from their names; their hair is short and their beards are cut close around the jaw. The painter has endowed each individual with a lively personality and the work shows considerable stylistic originality.

5

The Means of Propaganda

Soldiers and traders carried Mithraism to the furthest borders of the Roman Empire, and as time went by the names of more and more senior officers and public servants appeared on inscriptions dedicating themselves to the service of Mithras. In Poetovio we find a number of high-ranking customs officers amongst his followers; lieutenants (*legati*) and governors (*praesides*) of provinces are among those who have presented sacrificial altars. The name inscribed on a statue of Mithras found in Rome and now in the British Museum may be that of one of Trajan's freedmen. At the end of the first century A.D. Eastern influences percolated into Rome from many directions; from Ostia we have a bust of this militant emperor wearing

the Phrygian cap. He himself conducted campaigns in the East, while a century later under the rule of Septimius Severus, husband of the Syrian Julia Domna, the villa on the Aventine already mentioned was equipped with a Mithraeum of imperial character. From then on the court was won over to Mithras and a specially appointed court priest (*sacerdos invicti Mithrae domus Augustanae*) was in charge of the rites. If we can believe his chronicler, Commodus was initiated into the Mithraic mysteries. The sons of Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, were strong supporters of Mithras, and part of the baths of Caracalla in Rome was furnished as a Mithraeum. During this period various Mithraic temples were laid out in Rome (at Santa Prisca for example) and in the imperial family's African homeland—and there is evidence of the cult even on the Palatine, the imposing residence of the emperors, and up to the foot of the Capitol and the Forum.

It was not so much the Greek as the Eastern mysteries of Cybele and Isis which paved the way to the palaces on the Palatine. The growing influence of astrology was of decisive significance. Those who contemplated the constellations and their spheres of influence regarded the sun as the centre of the universe, symbolising the overlord who granted to his lieutenants the power to guide those on earth. Nero was the first Roman emperor to give expression to these theories in his *Domus Aurea*, and to be greeted as the new Mithras—on the occasion of the coronation of Tiridates of Armenia. He permitted himself to be portrayed and worshipped as Helios-Sol and is depicted as such in the colossal statue placed in the garden of his palace.

After the Severi and the notorious Heliogabalus we come at the end of the third century to Aurelian, who

promoted the cult of *Sol invictus*, the invincible Sun, and raised it to the status of an official cult. On the site where San Silvestro now stands a large temple to the sun was built. Trajan's hesitation in the first century to accept this Eastern sun-cult was rapidly overcome; the conception now suited the changed character of the Roman rulers, who were adopting more and more the status of Eastern despots. The contemporary coinage reflects this development very clearly. The emperor himself was the representative of the Sun-god; he is *dominus et deus*, he is *invictus*, he is *comes* and *conservator*. And the same titles ('lord and god', 'companion', 'protector') were already in use in connection with Mithras, the invincible Sun-god, whose mysteries were predominantly astrological. And so, when in A.D. 308 the aged Diocletian met Galerius and Licinius at Carnuntum near Vienna (see p. 36) and made a general agreement, they dedicated a great altar to Mithras, on which the god is described in fine monumental lettering as the benefactor of imperial might (*fautori imperii sui*).

Owing to the favours of the imperial court the Mithras cult gained a large following, especially in the second and third centuries. In Rome alone there were at one time or another more than a hundred temples dedicated to Mithras in all parts of the city, both inside and beyond the *pomerium* or city walls. It is worth noting that the Mithraic cave (*spelaeum*), even when fairly large, could never have held more than a limited number of followers, a circumstance that reveals a certain premeditated plan of organisation. If a 'parish' was growing, then clearly the first solution that suggested itself was to enlarge the sanctuary. Alternatively a new community could be established elsewhere. In this manner the faith gradually made new ground.

6

The Mithraic Temple

ACCORDING to a rule handed down through Euboulus in Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum*, 5-6, Mithras had to be worshipped in a natural cave (*αὐτοφυὲς σπήλαιον*) close to a source of running water. In some places in France (Bourg-St. Andéol), in Yugoslavia (Cavtat–Epidaurum; Nefertara near Plevlje) and in Germany (Schwarzerden) such caves have been found with representations of Mithras as bull-slayer cut into the face of the rock. A sanctuary at Tirgusor in Rumania, discovered in 1958 in a mountain range north-west of Constanza, is specially interesting because the artist Nicomedeus, who designed the main relief, mentions in the inscription that the cave was situated in a sacred wood (*ἄλσος*) on the Euphrates. The little stream near by was named after the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, where the Mithras mysteries first took shape (see plate opposite p. 129).

When the natural surroundings made it impossible to follow 'Zarathustra's' dictates to the letter, the Mithraeum was made artificially but the sanctuary was carefully given the appearance of a cave, and *spelaeum*, *specus*, *spelunca*, *crypta* are all used in the texts (see Fig. 4, Serdica–Sofia). Thus Mithraea were often constructed underground when a suitable site could be found, or influential members of the cult would give up a part of their houses for the installation of a sanctuary (Santa Prisca, San Clemente, San Martino ai Monti, etc.).

The cave was a symbol of the celestial vault (*εἰκόνα τοῦ κόσμου*), and the ceiling of a Mithraeum was often vaulted and decorated with stars. At Capua there is, in addition to

the stars, a figure of Luna in her chariot drawn by oxen. But the temples were kept dark and were almost invariably without windows so that Tertullian (*De Corona*, 15) asks

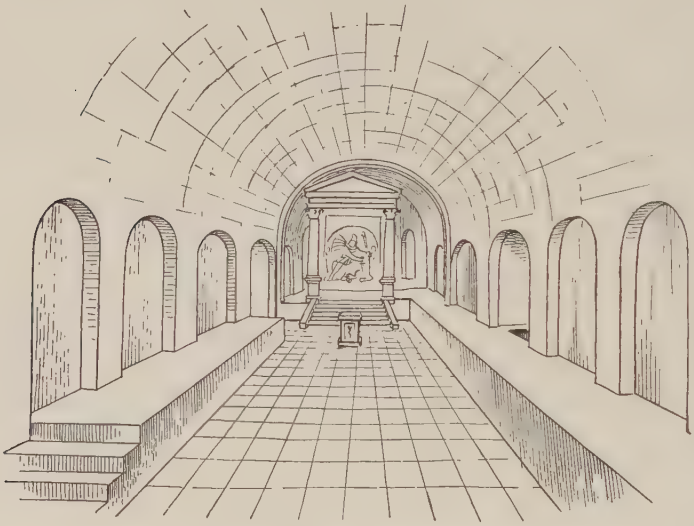

Fig. 4. Interior of the Mithraeum in Sofia

with a wry smile how it is possible to worship a god of light in what is 'truly a camp of darkness' (*vere castra tenebrarum*). Firmicius Maternus (a writer of the fourth century A.D.) states in his work on pagan heresies: 'such is the Sun-god they call Mithras, but they celebrate his mysteries in hidden caves, so that ever immersed in the concealing squalor of darkness (*obscuro tenebrarum squalore submersi*) they shun the beauty of brilliance and clarity of light'. Often an anteroom (*pronaos*) precedes the sanctuary proper. This could be used as an *apparatorium*, a room where the cult objects were kept and where the worshipper robed himself for the ceremonies.

The usual layout of the temple area consists of a central aisle with two flanking benches (*praesepia*, literally 'cribs') (cf. Fig. 5, Dura-Europos). It is not known if there was

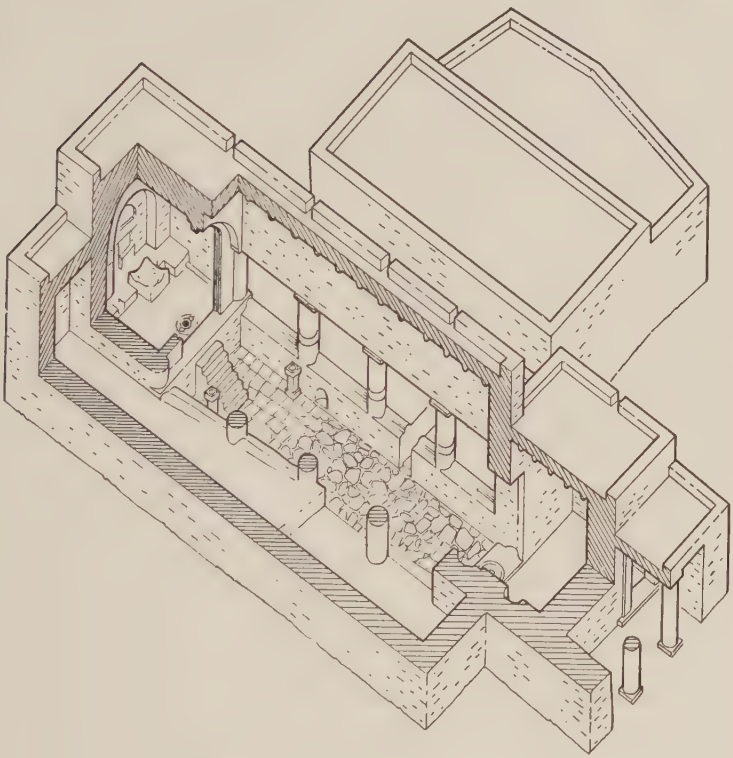

Fig. 5. Mithraeum at Dura

any symbolic significance behind this arrangement. At Ostia much of the aisle and benches is covered with mosaics. It was in the central aisle that the ceremonies took place watched by the initiates reclining on the benches, not kneeling as is sometimes incorrectly suggested by modern reconstructions. The benches were covered

with cushions and during the feast the initiates relaxed on them while servants placed food and drink on a ledge at the front.

In most cases there was a niche in the back wall at the end of the aisle (see plates opposite pp. 33 and 128), sometimes merely a relief attached to it instead. The main representation was either in marble, or painted on the wall or, as at Santa Prisca, in stucco. The ritual enactment of the slaying of the bull by Mithras had to take place in a cave, and a frequent way of giving the appearance of a cave was to inset small pieces of pumice stone in the wall. The niche was sometimes provided with a *velum* or curtain gracefully decorated (*deum in velo formatum* as one text has it), as at Ostia. Numerous variations on the basic layout are to be found, depending on natural circumstances or on the wishes of the individual who commissioned the erection of the Mithraeum.

In front of the niche, in keeping with the Persian tradition, stood two fire altars. Sometimes there was a stoop at the entrance. The dedications were distributed over the sanctuary without any set rule. In one single Mithraeum there might be several dozen consecrated reliefs attached to the walls. The sanctuaries at Sarmizegetusa in Rumania (see p. 62) and at Pettau in Yugoslavia are particularly rich in this respect. Niches or bases for statues of torch-bearers adorned the corners of the benches (now commonly called *podia*) and in most cases a few steps were built to make it easier to climb on to the benches. Refuse pits for the bones of the sacrificial animals are often found outside the sanctuary.

Painted sanctuaries are rarely found except in Rome and Ostia. In most cases the shrines are relatively small but occasionally some extra rooms have been added. The

purpose of these additional rooms is not always clear. At Ostia there is a small kitchen in front of the sanctuary of the Mithraeum 'delle pareti dipinte'.

There is one particularly interesting sanctuary which has three lateral chapels besides the central cult rooms. However modest the total effect may be, it is like a cathedral when compared with the other surviving sanctuaries. This Mithraeum, installed in an imperial villa, is at Santa Prisca, a site which has already been mentioned. It was certainly the most important Mithraic temple in Rome. Near the sacrificial niche is a small room, which originally had on its wall an image of which unfortunately no trace now remains. Along this wall stood various large jars without bases (possibly used for drink offerings). In the corner there may have been a representation of Mithras's birth from the rock. When this room was investigated in 1954 two magnificent heads of Venus and (Fig. 6) Sarapis came to light.

The three lateral chapels all have benches. In the central chapel the benches are very low but wide, while in the two other rooms they are higher and more suitable for sitting on. It is clear that all three rooms were used for different ceremonies. The central chapel had a painted niche, in the centre of which there was presumably a head of the Sun-god in stucco, encircled by the signs of the zodiac. In front of the niche there was a platform with a basin on it before which a person could kneel; when bending down, his head would be exactly above the basin in a position appropriate to some form of baptism. In the room on the left there was likewise a basin set on the ground and containing a second bowl with an opening at the bottom and a roughly incised inscription around the rim. Unfortunately there is as yet no agreement on the

interpretation of this *graffito*. Professor C. W. Volgraff of Utrecht transcribes it as: *Te cauterizo, i Saturne, i Atar, i Opi*, 'I brand thee, come Saturn, come Atar, come Ops'. Saturn and Ops, his wife, goddess of plenty, were the patrons of the Golden Age, while Atar was the Persian god of fire invoked when the initiate underwent the ordeal by fire. At the bottom of the basin lay a small glass vessel, for which Professor Volgraff can give no satisfactory explanation. Professor R. Egger of Vienna offers a very different solution: *M(arcus) Au.*, *(pa)t(er) Cauti dat l(ibenti) a(nimo)*, 'Marcus Aurelius(?) Father, gives this right willingly to Cautes'. In this case the bowl would merely represent a simple offering to Cautes, and the small glass vessel would have served for drink offerings. The present writer prefers not to give an opinion, since he cannot adhere wholeheartedly to either interpretation.

The third chapel, which is only accessible through the central chamber, did not yield any finds and so its intended use must remain unknown. All that is left is a floor of clayey earth which, if Professor Volgraff's theory about the left-hand chapel is correct, and if the central room was some sort of baptistery, may mean that the third chapel was used for purification by earth and the Mithraeum itself for traversing the element of air by means of the seven planets (see p. 156). He who passed through these ceremonies was, like the participant in the Isis mysteries, *vectus per omnia elementa* (passed through all the elements). Of the grades particularly involved in this symbolic passage through the four elements, the Lion was the symbol of fire (see p. 146) and we may assume that the three lower grades symbolised earth, water and air. While the lowest grade, the Raven, was being inititiated in the central room, we may imagine the Bride, the Soldier and

the Lion receiving their initiation in the side chapels. But this matter will be considered below when we discuss the seven grades through which the initiated could pass in order to become wholly identified with Mithras.*

7

Important Mithraic Sanctuaries

(i) THE AVENTINE MITHRAEUM

THE Aventine is one of the most delightful of the seven hills of Rome, commanding as it does a magnificent view of the Tiber, the palaces on the Palatine and the country towards the port of Ostia. In the imperial period, as now, the Aventine was a luxury quarter; sumptuous villas were built there with an aqueduct for the supply of water to private houses, and the quiet streets formed a peaceful island amid the typical noisy bustle of a southern town. At the end of the first century A.D. and even before he became emperor, Trajan built himself a private *palazzo* next to that of his friend L. Licinius Sura, who was likewise born in Spain. We know from literary evidence that Trajan possessed this grand house on the Aventine, but it is only recently that Dr. C. C. van Essen of the Netherlands Historical Institute in Rome has shown that in all probability the early fifth century basilica of Santa Prisca was built on this very site on the so-called Great Aventine, not far from the splendid basilica of Santa Sabina. In the house under Santa Prisca bricks have been found stamped with manufacturers' marks, as in other Roman buildings. These

* For the grades see Chapter 14 below.

makers' marks have been studied and dated by the American scholar H. Bloch, so that it is now possible to use them in dating architectural remains of uncertain age, and it is by this method that the *palazzo* under Santa Prisca has been attributed to the reign of Trajan. Many alterations can be detected dating from the period following Trajan's death in A.D. 117; the house certainly came into the hands of his successors, and when at the end of the second century the Severan emperors of Syrian origin came to the throne, a Mithraic temple was installed. The exact date of this addition is known from an inscription on a side wall of the cult niche which contained the image of the bull-slayer. It reads: *natus prima luce duobus Augustis co(n)s(ulibus) Severo et Anton(ino) XII k(alendas) decem(bres) dies Saturni luna XVIII* ('born at the first light, when the Emperor Severus and Antoninus were consuls on the twelfth day before the first of December, on the eighteenth moon, on the day of Saturn'). According to the Roman calendar this is November 20th, A.D. 202, the year in which Severus and his son Caracella were consuls. A person, who strangely enough does not give his name, put on record that he was 'born' on that day, meaning initiated into the Mithras cult. It is incidentally significant that his initiation took place two days after the date on which the birthday of the Sun-god was officially celebrated in Syria. An inscription of the year A.D. 322 set up by a commander of Salsovia in Lower Moesia mentions November 18th as the happy day and it is quite possible that the author of the *graffito* in the Aventine sanctuary came from Syria; names of Eastern origin are indeed to be found on the side-wall paintings. However this may be, the cult niche in the sanctuary was completed in A.D. 202.

The Mithraeum consists of a simple room comprising,

as usual, a central aisle with two benches on which the initiates reclined. The side walls were crudely decorated with pictures of eminent initiates (mostly of the Lion grade). Immediately behind the entrance, at the point where the benches began, there were two niches for statues of the torch-bearers. Mithras himself is portrayed as bull-slayer in the large niche against the far wall facing the entrance. A few of the contemporary initiates' names are mentioned on the paintings; sometimes these are orientals who had established successful businesses in Rome and Ostia and settled on the Aventine.

For some twenty years ceremonies took place in this comparatively small sanctuary. Renovation and enlargement of the cult room were begun about A.D. 220. Perhaps under the influence of a new Father of the community, craftsmen more skilful than those originally employed were put to work. First fresh stucco was laid on over the old paintings and then much finer frescoes were painted over the earlier designs. In general, the same motifs were used and again the paintings showed processions of Lions bringing offerings. Certain features of the original scheme were, however, left out and new elements added. The verses, so often a valuable source of information (see p. 172), were omitted, but the procession of the seven grades of the initiated was left untouched, as were the rows of distinguished members with the exception of a few minor details. On the left-hand wall a magnificent scene of the sacred meal partaken by Sol and Mithras was added. Although various artists worked on the first layer of paintings, dating from A.D. 200, one gets the impression that the composition of this second layer was entrusted to a single master painter.

Another addition was a large reclining figure of

Oceanus-Caelus in stucco. As in so many portrayals of Mithras (see p. 104), he is shown as a witness at the bull-slaying (see plate opposite p. 33). The god is an imposing figure with long wavy locks framing his head, which was gilded and draped with a *velum*. A deep blue cloak shrouds the legs and lower part of the figure. The group round the original representation of Mithras himself was touched up and enlarged to include the figures of Sarapis (an Egyptian god of fertility, see Fig. 6), Venus, Mars and other gods—possibly the ones after whom planets have been named. In the execution of these fine works of art two separate hands can be detected, in the different treatment of the eyes of the various figures.

The enlarging of the sanctuary and the furnishing of the three lateral chapels for special initiation rites (see p. 41) also involved a considerable lengthening of the central chamber, the Mithraeum proper, by the addition of a narthex.

During the following years and until the end of the fourth century A.D. several minor changes were made—for instance the stucco groups were given fresh colouring—but otherwise the Mithraeum continued in use in much the same form until its annexation by the Christians. Meanwhile, at some point during the fourth century, part of the villa seems to have been acquired by a certain Prisca, a Christian matron who offered the facilities of her house to other believers for the celebration of the Christian faith, so that these two disparate groups, each practising its own religious beliefs, were forced to co-exist with only a matter of feet to separate them. The Mithraists quickly built a little wall beside one of the entrances to their sanctuary to block their ceremonies from the gaze of the uninitiated. In her religious zeal Prisca, who was in later times often con-

fused with the Prisca supposed to have been baptised by St Peter himself, planted the Christian faith alongside that of the Persian Mithras. At the same time triumphant Christianity conquered the imperial court, just as before Mithras had cast his spell upon it.

Fig. 6. The Egyptian god Sarapis

The events which followed were catastrophic for the devotees of the Eastern cult. Full of righteous fervour and the desire to remove all signs of false gods, the companions of St Prisca invaded the sanctuary of Mithras and des-

troyed its fittings. This iconoclasm was inspired by the fact that the Mithraic images portrayed the Christians' most hated rival, and so it was imperative to expunge the frescoes and in particular the representation of the sacred meal of Mithras and Sol with its affinities to the Eucharist. The Christians hacked at the paintings with axes, while the followers of Mithras succeeded, at the last minute it seems, in saving a few things, as is proved by the survival of a cache of sixteen undamaged lamps. But they were never again given the opportunity to resume their cult. The Christians threw cart-loads of refuse from a nearby cemetery into the sacred rooms, wrecked the building where once had stood an imperial villa, and in triumph erected the *Basilica Sanctae Priscae* (whose design has sometimes been compared with the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore) on the ruins of the Mithraeum.

Such, briefly, are the results of the two excavations on the site. The first, undertaken by the Augustinian Fathers in the years 1934-37 with the object of finding out more about St Prisca, led to the discovery of the Mithraeum. The subsequent Dutch excavations of 1953-58 resulted in the complete clearance of the sanctuary and the setting up of a small museum to house the finds.

It is opportune to examine at this point some of the reasons why this sanctuary has such special importance for our knowledge of the Mithras cult. In the first place there are the particularly fine and extremely rare stucco panels representing heads of Sarapis, Venus and Mars and a second head of Mithras which were found in August 1956 in a small space beside the cult niche. Owing to the brittleness of the material, very few works in stucco have been preserved; indeed the unearthing of these heads took several weeks. Before bringing them into the daylight, they

Standing figure of Mithras from Rome

Lion; painting in the Mithraeum under the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome

had to be carefully dried, and the Italian restorer G. Sansone subsequently worked on them for several months adding marble dust as a preservative filler. Outstanding as a work of art is the imposing head of the Egyptian god Sarapis who bears on his head a basket of fruit (see Fig. 6) because he himself is the giver of fruitfulness. The head is closely related to the original creation of the Greek sculptor Bryaxis. Sarapis, like Zeus, is shown with heavy locks of hair and a thick beard, severe but benevolent. The god Sarapis was sometimes equated with Saturn, but his presence in the Mithras cult proves that this Egyptian deity, often mentioned in the same breath with Isis, was adopted by worshippers of Mithras during the period when the cult was making an all-out attempt at supremacy. This same association is seen in a Greek inscription of the same period from the Mithraic shrine installed in a large room in the Baths of Caracalla. The inscription is a dedication to 'Zeus Helios, the great Sarapis, the saviour and giver of abundance, he who answers prayers, the beneficent and invincible Mithras'.

The most important feature of the Aventine sanctuary is the two layers of wall-paintings. These are an unparalleled source of knowledge for the cult ceremonies, and it is just this ritual which has hitherto been shrouded in mystery. The left-hand wall shows a long procession of members of the Lion grade carrying offerings. The procession is led by a man of solemn and erect bearing. In his right hand he holds a burning taper while in the left he carries a further supply. Behind him walks a man carrying a cock; beyond can be seen two members of Lion rank, Phoebus (the 'radiant one') and Gelasius (the 'laughing one'). The first holds a glass bowl in both hands, in which is a loaf or a cake, the second carries a vessel. These offer-

ings immediately arrest the onlooker's attention and link the scene with the sacred meal of Sol and Mithras, to which the procession is making its way. Here bread and wine replace the flesh and blood of the bull (see p. 102). These paintings of *c.* A.D. 220 provide direct evidence of ceremonial procedure no less valuable than the evidence provided by the procession of the seven grades of initiation, where each grade is portrayed with his own attribute (see p. 138).

A painting on the right-hand wall of the Mithraeum gives a lively picture of the ceremony of the *suovetaurilia*, the imperial state sacrifice of bull, ram and pig. In front walks an initiate who, like all the other participants in the processions, bears the title of Lion (only a few fragments of this figure have been preserved). Next comes a man leading a white bull and after him a Lion carrying a large cock. This last figure, dressed in a short tunic and with a beard cut close round the jaw, is followed by a man who is bending forward to drive a ram before him (see plate opposite p. 49). The artist has painted this figure in a somewhat impressionistic style and although he is the only one who seems to be looking into the room, his eyes are so placed that it is impossible for the onlooker to meet his gaze. But once he has been carefully studied he is unforgettable; proudly bearing his offerings in the procession he is completely absorbed in the ritual. The procession ends with the Lions Nicephorus (the 'Conquest-bearer') and Theodorus (the 'Gift of God'), the former carrying a vessel, the latter leading a boar. This is the only third-century representation of the *suovetaurilia* and indeed the only known painting of this subject. Its appearance in the Mithraic cult is of course unique. Note that the bull leads the procession and, like the magnificent

beast slain by Mithras on the painting in the Mithraeum at Capua, its hide is white. The presence of the cock is also worth comment. It is found both on the lower layer of paintings in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum and again on the left-hand wall. The cock is the bird of Persian myth which wards off evil spirits by its crowing. The followers of Mazda held it sacred, and the white cock was specially dedicated to both Ahura-Mazda and Mithras. These ideas spread to the West, as several references attest. When Hippolytus advised baptism *hora gallicinii* (at the hour of the crowing of the cock) he was thinking of the accepted power of the cock to dispel demons and Satan, a reference which recalls the *graffito* with the description of the initiation *prima luce*. The vessel carried by Nicephorus may contain wine or serve to catch the bull's blood after the ritual killing.

The *suovetaurilia* was a state offering and the discovery of its representation proved that the sanctuary under Santa Prisca was an official state Mithraeum. The rite does not of course appear on the paintings of the lower layer; here, on the left-hand wall, only a young bull and a bristling boar are depicted. Consequently the sacrifice must have taken place at a special festival. This festival was probably the celebration of the sanctuary's renovation about A.D. 220, as the renovation or enlargement of a temple was often celebrated by this kind of sacrifice. In the lower layer the lines from liturgical hymns recorded on the paintings are an absolutely unique discovery.

One is struck by the mixed character of the various finds from this site. That both rich and poor made their offerings to the god is well illustrated by the two heads of the Sun-god installed within the sanctuary (see plate opposite p. 112). First, there is the somewhat primitive

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head of Sol cut out of a leaden plate. The eyes, mouth and halo of seven rays are fretted so that a lamp can be placed behind to light up the head. The second head, however, is a true work of art, a mosaic in marble. Great care has gone into the choice of the precious marble and each fragment has been meticulously finished. Many weeks of work must have been expended on this one piece and the result is a living portrait of the Sun-god, his cheeks touched with a faint blush and flamboyant hair laid in rich curls around his head.

It is clear that the followers of Mithras possessed an unparalleled sanctuary in the Aventine chapel, and this is all the more revealing to the modern scholar when studied in conjunction with the finds made at Ostia. It also throws light on the many discoveries made in the Walbrook Mithraeum.

(ii) THE WALBROOK MITHRAEUM

Only a few years ago Professor G. Becatti devoted a monograph in his exhaustive series on Roman Ostia to the Mithraea of this ancient port lying at the mouth of the Tiber. In this small town, flourishing in the second and third centuries A.D., there is evidence for no less than sixteen Mithraea at this early date and future excavations may yield still more, and this in a town of an estimated population of only some 50,000 to 60,000 inhabitants. The number of Mithraea, however small in absolute terms, is appreciable in comparison with the number of other temples at Ostia built in honour of gods outside the official pantheon. We have already noted that gods of Eastern origin were particularly popular with the mixed populations of ports (see p. 32).

The discovery in 1954 of a Mithraeum in the port of

Roman London (Londinium) should therefore occasion no surprise though thousands of Londoners crowded day after day round the excavations near the Mansion House

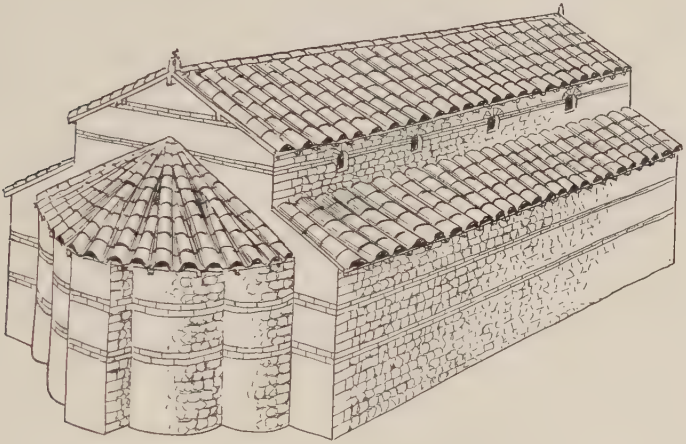

Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the exterior of the Walbrook Mithraeum, London

in the very heart of the City. The temple was situated to the east of the course of the Roman Walbrook, thus following the normal practice of siting near water. But because the site, like that at Ostia, was so low-lying, the temple could not be built underground. During the short time allotted to the excavators before the construction of what is now Bucklersbury House, the Mithraeum was shown to have been a comparatively small structure of 18 metres by 7 metres, and orientated east-west. The layout of the central aisle with two side-benches and terminal apse gave the Mithraeum the appearance of a small basilica (Fig. 7). The associated finds suggested that it was founded about A.D. 150 and remained in use until the fourth century. Various alterations took place, the floor of

the central aisle, for instance, being raised to the same level as the apse.

The discovery of the Walbrook Mithraeum was anticipated by some important finds which were made at the same spot in 1889 and were likewise associated with the Mithras cult. These include a relief showing Mithras the bull-slayer encircled by the signs of the Zodiac, with, in the four corners, the busts of two Wind-gods and Sol and Luna in their chariots. The relief was consecrated by one Ulpius Silvanus, a veteran of the Second Legion, who was appointed at Orange in southern France. The later excavations of 1954 yielded a right hand carved in marble, probably again part of a Mithras figure, but the proportions of the hand are such that it must have belonged to a statue too big to be housed in the Walbrook sanctuary. As a result the existence of another and larger Mithraeum in the City has been postulated. Among the earlier finds was also the upper part of a reclining marble statue of Oceanus, but unlike its Santa Prisca counterpart the head is not decorated with a head cloth (*velum*); this statue may have been placed in front of the relief of the bull-slayer, as in the Aventine Mithraeum. We do not, however, know the original position of any of the more recently discovered pieces. Among these was a magnificent marble head of Mithras, a head of a goddess (perhaps Athena or the *Dea Roma*), a statuette of a seated Mercury and the lower part of a relief showing a torch-bearer. Of particular interest is a lively Dionysus group, where the god is represented with a Satyr, a Maenad and Silenus riding on a donkey. Some members of the Mithras community possibly came from the Balkans and the portrayal of the Danubian horsemen seems to point in this direction.

The show-piece of the excavation is the marble head of

Sarapis uncovered on October 4th, 1954, less than two months after the find of the Santa Prisca Sarapis, thus offering a vivid illustration of the manner in which the chance finds of excavation can add to the sum total of our knowledge. It is particularly interesting to compare the two heads, the one in marble, the other in stucco; the same expression of solemnity and of earnestness, the same spirit of goodness are apparent in both.

Apart from the intrinsic interest of these London finds, the most outstanding feature of the Walbrook Mithraeum is its site, since it is the only certain Mithraic shrine so far discovered in the south of England. The other Mithraic temples of Britain were principally situated on or near the lines of fortification where the bulk of the Roman garrisons settled. The majority are in the north, along Hadrian's Wall, though a Mithraeum has recently been discovered close to the Roman fort at Segontium (Caernarvon).

(iii) THE MERIDA MITHRAEUM

Merida (*Emerita Augusta* of the Roman province of Lusitania) is the site of a beautiful little town which has become widely known in the present century owing to a notable series of excavations which revealed among other things a particularly interesting Roman theatre, a circus, an amphitheatre and a number of temples. In 1902 and 1913 a number of fine sculptures were found in the present Plaza de Toros, probably belonging to a temple of Mithras about which unfortunately very little is known. However, these finds are worth mentioning because in many respects they are closely related to those of the London and Santa Prisca Mithraea. A dated inscription records that Gaius Accius Hedychrus was the Father of the Merida community in the year A.D. 155 and that he him-

self consecrated two statues. The first of these is a figure of Mercury carved from marble, seated on a rock and partly covered with a cloth. The torso of the god is bare and his feet winged, and leaning against the rock is a lyre with an engraved inscription. The second marble statue is of Oceanus, reclining on his back supported by a dolphin. The head and arms are lost, but the remains of a cornucopia are still clearly visible. On the base a series of undulating lines may be intended to indicate water.

During the period when Hedychrus was Father of this Mithraeum, Gaius Corius Avitus consecrated a highly original statue of the young Mithras, signed by its sculptor Demetrius in Greek. Mithras stands upright, clad in a richly pleated tunic, over which is thrown a heavily draped cloak; a dolphin can be seen by his left foot. Reminiscent of this statue is another fine work possibly, although not certainly, by the same Demetrius. It is a standing figure of a young god, naked except for a short shoulder cloak, with, by his right foot, a tree-stump on which is seated a lion—in all likelihood yet another representation of Mithras. An inscription on a marble altar states that in A.D. 155 a certain Marcus Valerius Secundus, quarter-master of the Seventh Legion, consecrated an altar 'to the birth of the invincible Mithras'.

The temple was particularly rich in statues although no actual representation of the bull-slaying scene was recovered. On the other hand there were two statues of Venus, one possibly of Aesculapius, one of Poseidon, two of standing women, each draped in a long *chiton*, and lastly a head of Sarapis—a somewhat effeminate portrait when compared with those of Santa Prisca and the London Mithraeum.

Two statues of the Time-god complete this collection of

sculptures. One of these has the customary horrific expression; the other is shown in a softer, more idealised form and may therefore be the work of the Greek Demetrius already mentioned. The latter god is a youthful figure with a human head and carries a lion mask on his chest. In certain respects it resembles the other youthful figure with his attendant lion from this same Mithraeum. We shall have to return to this particular statue in the chapter on the Time-god (see plate opposite p. 128 and Chapter 12 below). Only one relief has been found at Merida, but this too is of exceptional interest. Three figures are seen reclining behind a table covered with food, perhaps bread and meat, with two figures in long cloaks standing on either side. A further figure approaches from the left with a dish in his hands on which lies a bull's head—further proof that the flesh of this animal was consumed at the sacred Mithraic meal. It is no coincidence that this same relief shows the birth of Mithras, for it was the god himself who was regarded as performing the act of the bull-slaying and so making possible the holding of the meal.

(iv)

THE MITHRAEA OF DEUTSCH-ALTENBURG

Deutsch-Altenburg, which lies to the east of Vienna, the Roman Vindobona, and close to the Hungarian border, is today a small town known only as a health resort, but in the first century A.D. the Romans built a large settlement there which they named Carnuntum. The town was situated at the meeting-point of two important lines of communication: the Danube and the amber trade route which ran from the Baltic to Italy. Carnuntum became the

capital of the province of Pannonia and, because of the ever imminent danger of incursions by the Marcomanni and Quadi, troops were always concentrated at this important junction, until Marcus Aurelius, after much heavy fighting, finally managed to drive the enemy back to the north of the Danube in a campaign during which he died in Vienna in the year A.D. 180. Septimius Severus was proclaimed emperor at Carnuntum in A.D. 193 and it was he who granted the title of *colonia* to the small community which had sprung up round the fortress. In A.D. 308 Diocletian chose Carnuntum for the holding of an important conference with his successors. The aged emperor had recently abdicated and was quietly living a life of retirement in his palace at Spalato (Split) in Yugoslavia, but he had not been left to enjoy his peace for long. The rivalry between the two Emperors or 'Augusti' and their heirs apparent, styled 'Caesars', could be kept in bounds only by Diocletian himself, and then only temporarily. Present at the conference, which took place in November, were Galerius Maximianus, Emperor of the East, Valerius Licinianus Licinius, Emperor of the West, and Maximianus Herculius, who had also abdicated but was trying to make a come-back on the political stage. At this assembly Diocletian scored one great victory in persuading Maximian to renounce this second claim to the throne, thus enabling the two Augusti to go on governing the empire with their respective Caesars. In acknowledgment the signatories of the pact consecrated a large altar, now preserved in the fine Carnuntum museum, with an inscription which records that they addressed themselves gratefully to 'the unvanquished Sun-god Mithras, the benefactor of their rule' and had restored the god's sanctuary. The altar in the Mithraeum had been in position before

the arrival of the emperors, and at the close of the conference the original inscription was hastily erased and the new one carved in its place. That the emperors consecrated this altar to Mithras and not to any other god was no mere concession to the garrison-town of Carnuntum where the Fifteenth Legion, recently arrived from the East, was encamped. The dedication shows how the worship of *Sol invictus* in connection with the emperor-cult had become the focal point of the state religion in the years following the rule of Aurelian (cf. Swoboda, *Carnuntum*, p. 64).

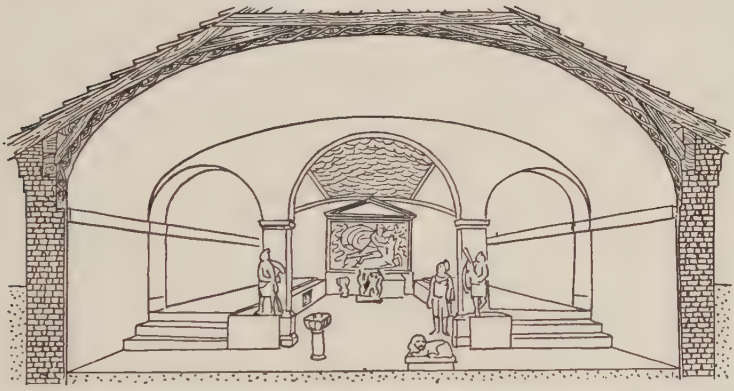

Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the Mithraeum at Deutsch-Altenburg

This important Mithraeum (Fig. 8) was excavated on the west side of the town in 1894 and is without doubt the most significant of the three Mithraic temples so far discovered in Deutsch-Altenburg. The temple is 23 metres long and 8·5 metres wide. From a large ante-room one descends into the sanctuary proper, with the central relief, about 4 metres broad and 3 metres high but of which only fragments were found, erected by Titus Falvius Viator. Holes have been made in the Phrygian cap of the bull-

slayer in order that rays of the sun might be inserted (Fig. 9). In this Mithraeum there was also a second and uniquely important altar which portrayed the four Wind-

Fig. 9. Reconstructed relief of Mithras from the Deutsch-Altenburg Mithraeum

gods and the four seasons, recognisable both by their individual attributes and by the wings attached to their temples. Between the figures of Spring and Summer stands Caelus, the god of heaven who directs the order of the seasons and the winds in their courses (see p. 161). This altar was dedicated by a Roman citizen Magnius, originally of foreign stock, as is indicated by his *cognomen* Heracla.

The customary statues of Cautes and Cautopates* were also found at the head of the reclining benches, and their positions may be compared with the similar Santa Prisca figures. There was a fine statue of the young Mithras at

* See below, pp. 70 seqq.

the moment of his birth from a cone-shaped rock beside a large tree, at whose base is a limestone shell which must have served as a water basin. Finally there was a crouching lion holding a bull's head between its front paws.

Of the other two Mithraea in Carnuntum much less is known; one was situated next to a temple of the Syrian Jupiter Dolichenus, the other on the north bank of the Danube near a quarry. In the last-mentioned sanctuary there were, besides a statue of Mithras as bull-slayer, statues of the torch-bearers, a representation of Mithras's birth from the rock, and several sacrificial altars. The temple must have been in use for a considerable period of time, since there is an inscription recording the restoration of the *spelaeum* (cave) which had collapsed with age. Special attention was devoted to the birth of the god. One altar was consecrated by a priest, Publius Aelius Nigrinus, to the 'life giving rock', while Adlectus, a slave, had dedicated another to Mithras as 'creator of light'. Titus Flavius Verecundus, a centurion from the Fourteenth double-Legion, whose birth-place was Savaria (Szombathely in Hungary—south of Carnuntum and on the main route to Yugoslavia) consecrated an altar decorated with the images of Cautes and Cautopates.

The motif of the lion holding a bull's head between its front paws, which was included among the figures in the principal Mithraeum, has been found repeatedly in Carnuntum. Sometimes the lion's head is pierced with a round opening, in which connection the story of the martyrdom of the *Quattro Coronati*—for whom a magnificent church was built in Rome—has a special interest. This church is dedicated to the memory of four Roman soldiers who were martyred for refusing to worship Aesculapius. According to another version of the story the Coronati were sculptors

from Pannonia, of which Carnuntum was the capital, and they were put to death because of their refusal to make a statue of the healing god. This account records that the sculptors carved *leones fundentes aquam*, water-spouting lions. These lions were clearly part of a fountain, and one notices here the same underlying symbolism as on several reliefs of Mithras where the lion is shown sitting in a threatening attitude near a water-vessel (Fig. 10). The elements of fire and water were held to be in conflict with each other and we shall see later that on this account those who bore the grade of Lion, symbol of fire, could not be purified by water but had to use honey instead. The devouring character of the lion was expressed in its hold on the bull's head. As de Ruyt has pointed out, this group played an important part in the development of later Christian, funerary symbolism.

Fig. 10. Fragment of a relief showing a lion in a threatening attitude beside a water vessel

(v) THE MITHRAEUM AT SARMIZEGETUSA

It is due to intensive research by Professor C. Daicoviciu of the University of Cluj that the last decade of Rumania's

history before the Roman period is so comparatively well known. Those who have had the opportunity to admire the mighty Dacian citadels situated in the heart of the Transylvanian mountains must feel a debt of gratitude to the archaeologists who laboured to uncover their majestic remains. No less worthy of admiration is the emperor Trajan, who in two strenuous campaigns in this harsh and unfamiliar terrain overcame all the scattered strongholds and crowned his success by subjugating Decebal, the leader of the Dacians. Trajan's column in Rome is the greatest monument of a proud general and it was he who laid the foundations of the province of Dacia, establishing the *colonia*, *Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica* in the valley of the Hateg, west of the region of the hill-top citadels. Later, under Hadrian, this *colonia* became known as Sarmizegetusa, after the former capital of the Dacians. In this the emperor followed a time-honoured Roman policy, adopted by his distant ancestors of the third century B.C. who replaced the Etruscan hill town of *Falerii veteres* (Civita Castellana) by a *Falerii novi* on the plain below. Sarmizegetusa was ringed by extensive walls and became exceedingly prosperous, as witness its forum, amphitheatre and other important buildings. At the beginning of the third century the town received the proud title of *metropolis* or 'mother town', a distinction recorded in an inscription on a marble column erected in a Mithraeum by two members of the town council. This sanctuary, excavated between 1881 and 1883, is the largest Mithraic temple so far recorded. It measures 26 metres by 12 metres and consists of one long vaulted chamber with the normal layout of central aisle and benches but without side chapels. No other Mithraeum has yielded such rich finds as that at Sarmizegetusa.

Countless reliefs were affixed to the walls, and numerous altars with dedications, which offer considerable insight into the private lives of the members of the community, were set up. To quote some examples: A certain Protas, deputy to the imperial treasury official (*vicarius*) Ampliatus, consecrated a marble column for his master's health. This column is decorated at the top with a bull's head and a bird holding a leaf in its beak. The name Protas points to an Eastern origin, and he called Mithras 'Nabarze', a Persian word commonly equated with the Latin *invictus*, unconquered or invincible, but more recently interpreted as 'great man', i.e. hero. Carpion, a freed man, who had been freed by the Emperor himself, was a *tabularius*, a book keeper; Valerianus was an *Augustalis*, a member of the priestly college in the temple of the Imperial cult (the *Aedes Augustalium* which has also been excavated at Sarmizegetusa); Longus held the position of *salarius*; a certain Synethus was assistant to a *tabularius*; Severus was again a slave freed by the Emperor.

In this community, situated on the fringes of the Roman Empire, all these individuals were united in a common brotherhood. What is particularly interesting is that even the official augur dedicated a relief of the bull-slaying. We know that another member of the community, Cornelius Cornelianus, held the rank of *defensor lecticariorum*, protector of the litter-bearers. A small altar, found as early as 1856 and bearing the words *soli invicto Mitrae aniceto*, was the gift of Hermadio, apparently a Greek or an oriental since not only the Latin word *invictus* but also the Greek equivalent *anicetus* are used in its dedication. At Caransebe (ancient Tibiscum), a town on the Danube south of Sarmizegetusa, a certain Hermadio, who styles himself ruler of Turranius, dedicated another inscription to Mithras

and again used the Persian adjective in the phrase *soli invicto nebarze Mithrae*. Although this is of course only an inference, it is quite possible that the Dacian Hermadio is the same person as the Lucius Flavius Hermadion who in Rome commissioned the superb relief, now in Dublin, of Mithras's birth from the rock. On the base of this statue we find above the name Hermadion a garland in which the word *nama* (hail) is inscribed (see p. 85).

The numerous reliefs at Sarmizegetusa, some of which have only survived in fragments, are typical of the Danube regions. Some of them are trapeziform in shape, while others are rounded at the top, and a single example of a circular relief is known. They are carved mostly of local grey or bluish marble. In each case the life story of Mithras is related in detail and for this purpose the reliefs are divided into three parts. The centre comprises the principal scene, the bull-slaying, while the top and bottom portions portray other scenes. Some reliefs are carved with free-standing figures and one of these, on which traces of red paint still remain, deserves particular attention (Fig. 11). Here Mithras is portrayed in the process of killing the bull, its body adorned with the wide sacrificial ribbon. From beneath the god crawls a snake, its head turned in the direction of the bull's death wound. On either side stand the torch-bearers, and of particular interest is the figure of Cautopates, at the rear of the bull and holding its tail in his left hand. The tail is charged with magic force and the torch-bearer is striving to obtain a share in this mysterious power. There is a lion's head above a mixing vessel, as on some other reliefs. Behind Cautopates stands Mithras in his rôle of bull-bearer, while behind Cautes, who holds a torch in each hand, we see the birth of Mithras from the rock. Beneath stands a figure in oriental

attire with his right hand resting on his own left shoulder. The entrance of the cave is defined by an arch decorated with leaves, a visible reminder of the rich growth which directly follows the bull-slaying. In the border can be detected the busts of Sol and Luna as well as the raven, the messenger of Mithras. Thus in this rich Mithraeum many artists were employed to express through their art the piety of the many and varied members of the community.

Fig. 11. Mithras slaying the bull

8

The God's Most Famous Feat

On the rear wall of every Mithraeum there was a representation of the bull-slaying, which was regarded within the Mithraic cult as the most outstanding of Mithras's deeds, performed as it was for the benefit of mankind. Sometimes a separate niche was made to accommodate this particular group, lit only by the flickering light of oil-lamps. The Mithraea were often built on an east-west axis so that the first rays of the rising sun should fall through a window or an opening in the vault on to the image of Mithras, the bull-slayer.

The killing of the bull is the most frequently illustrated of all the god's legendary exploits. It seems to have been practically a fixed rule that this scene should be portrayed in every sanctuary. Although there are many variations, the event was depicted according to a set convention and the same basic iconography is always followed; the god, young and supple, strong as Herakles himself, forces down the heavy animal with his knee and, holding up its head by one horn or the nostrils, thrusts his dagger deep into the bull's heart.

The *tauromachia* with the bull's life blood pouring out in a last desperate convulsion was reputed to have taken place in a cave, and in the Santa Prisca temple the niche was made to look like a cave by the use of inset pumice stone (see plate opposite p. 33). The top of the relief was often arched and the illusion of a vaulted cave was heightened by the skilful use of trees and plants. The cave (*spelaeum*) was regarded as a symbol of the celestial vault and of the Cosmos. Sol and Luna were shown in the upper

corners and the figures of the various eponymous gods and goddesses of the planets were to be found on the arched border—as in the Bologna relief. Occasionally there was a carved row of seven altars alternating with seven daggers, and sometimes trees were added as well, as for instance at Sarmizegetusa. Here the vegetation, part of which is only suggested by decorative borders, should be related to the magic results of the bull-slaying, for after the bull's fatal struggle, ears of corn, charged with magic power, suddenly sprang from its blood and tail. In several reliefs a dog and snake are raising their heads towards the animal's death wound in an attempt to drink the blood, while a scorpion is gripping the dying beast's genitals in its claws.

Ancient literature gives hardly any information about the meaning of this symbolic act, and what little we know must be deduced almost entirely from the monuments themselves. The great gap which exists between the records of the Persian and Roman Mithras makes interpretation all the more difficult. Of the various, sometimes fantastic, explanations, Franz Cumont's is by far the most satisfactory and every subsequent attempt to depart from his theories has led only to fresh complications.

What is certain is that the bull-slaying was regarded as a beneficial and creative act; out of death arose fresh life—a concept which lies at the root of all the ancient mystery religions, for all concentrate on the same question of life, death and rebirth as observed in the annual cycle of nature. Mother Earth is entrusted with seed of corn and soon the golden harvest is reaped. Persephone, Attis, Adonis, all perish to rise anew.

Is it then possible that Mithras, personified in the bull, was thought of as killing himself only to be resurrected? Although the facts at our disposal do not provide definite

proof for this view, there are certain similarities between the bull-slaying and some of the Persian texts. According to the Bundahishn and the apocalyptic Ayātkār i Zāmāspik, Ahura-Mazda, the supreme God of Good, created a bull even before Gayomart, the first superman. When the powers of evil desired to corrupt the work of creation, they attacked this bull. However, according to this 'apocalypse', there sprang from its spinal fluid 'many kinds of kinds', and this incident is described even more precisely in the Bundahishn where fifty-five kinds of grain and twelve kinds of medicinal plant are mentioned. It is a long way, however, from the evil Ahriman to the deeds of Mithras. Probably in a later development of the creation myth, more emphasis was placed on the ultimate beneficial influence of the bull-slaying. The evil which Ahriman desired to achieve became in Mithras's hands man's salvation, and he himself became the saviour (σωτήρ). An echo of Ahriman and his desire to attack the bull is preserved in the Mithraic image of the scorpion gripping the genitals. In the Bundahishn the scorpion is a particularly harmful animal, as are also the lizard, snake and frog. These beasts are Ahriman's agents of evil and to kill them was a meritorious act. The scorpion's rôle was to destroy at its source the fertile seed, which, according to other Persian writings, is conveyed to the moon to be purified and to produce Nature's varying species.

The snake, as we have just noted, was regarded by the Persians as baneful, but according to Herodotus (I, 140) the dog was held in such esteem that it shared with man himself the distinction of being the only living creatures which the Magi were not permitted to kill. Nevertheless, in the Mithraic iconography of the bull-slaying the dog and the snake are both shown trying to lick up the bull's

blood, and they are never shown in conflict with one another. In the hunt, another common set-piece, the dog accompanies Mithras as his faithful companion, and it seems therefore unlikely that the dog should seek to spoil Mithras's act of creation by polluting the bull's blood; the dog's act may be interpreted rather as an attempt to benefit from the blood's life-giving quality. So too with the snake, which in this context is not the harmful creature associated with Ahriman. Elsewhere it appears on Mithraic images as representing the earth in accordance with Greek symbolism. In the bull-slaying, therefore, the earth-snake licks up the blood in order to be fertilised for the benefit of mankind.

Thus the character of Mithras is expressed to the full in the bull-slaying, where he is the creator who brings new life to the world, the saviour who performs the all-important cosmic act which secures not only material needs but also—as we shall see later—universal well-being. It is little wonder that this scene was given the place of honour in the Mithraea and was a greater object of veneration than all the rest of the cult's sacred imagery.

9

The Figures round the Bull-Slayer

In the vaulted border of the cave behind Mithras there is often a raven, sometimes perched but more usually flying towards the god. He brings a message to which the god listens; in some representations Mithras is clearly looking back towards the raven. In classical literature the raven

(κόραξ) is the messenger (κήρυξ) of Apollo, and in the Mithraic ritual he is evidently associated with the Apollo-like Sun-god seen in the top left-hand corner of the relief. During the course of the actual mysteries the duties of those with the grade of Raven vividly recall the bull-slaying scene; they wear ravens' masks (Fig. 36 and p. 142) and perform as heralds the same rôle as the raven performs for Mithras. The bird conveys Sol's orders to Mithras to kill the bull, and the god carries out the order, although with an expression of anguish on his face. It grieves him to slay the magnificent beast, but like a true soldier he obeys in the knowledge that in the end life will be renewed. On several representations one ray of the seven-rayed halo (ἑπτάκτις) round the head of Sol shines out towards Mithras and so establishes contact with the god.

Nevertheless the scene is strange because there is no doubt from the evidence that the Sun-god was considered to be inferior to Mithras (see p. 96). Moreover, Mithras himself was also regarded as *Sol invictus*. One theory has it that Sol was the mediator who, through the raven, conveyed knowledge from Ahura-Mazda or Zeus-Jupiter. A second view is that Sol was originally the superior of Mithras and both were later incorporated into one mighty sun-figure, as when Mithras and Sol ascended to heaven in their chariot. This is a difficult problem to interpret and is still by no means finally resolved.

The Moon-goddess, as well as Sol, took part in creation. She is sometimes portrayed disappearing in her ox-drawn car at the moment when the sun's fiery chariot is rising. Usually only the upper part of the goddess is visible; she wears a diadem, and the sickle of the moon is displayed behind her head. According to Mithraic teaching the moon had the power to purify the semen of the bull

and nurtured the growth of plants and herbs during the dew-laden night.

Two other figures are rarely absent from the bull-slaying. Dressed in Persian clothes similar to those of Mithras, they are placed on either side of the bull and stand perfectly still with one leg in front of the other as if taking no part in the action. In some cases, however, one of them holds the bull's tail, apparently in order to share its magic power or to stimulate the growth of the corn ears sprouting from it. Sometimes these figures are represented as shepherds who were present at the birth of Mithras (Fig. 12), but they differ in character from Attis, for each carries a torch pointing either upward or downward (Fig. 13), by which they illustrate the ascending or descending path of Sol and Luna, the rising and setting sources of light, life and death. Generally the bearer with the uplifted torch is placed under Luna and his companion under Sol. Their names—Cautes, symbol of the rising morning sun, and Cautopates, the setting evening sun—have not yet been linguistically explained, but their symbolism has been deduced from the various representations. At the feet of Cautes there is sometimes a crowing cock (which the Greeks called the Persian bird), whose crowing puts evil spirits to flight. Sometimes Cautopates is shown sitting in a highly expressive attitude with his head resting on one hand, the very soul of sadness, contrasting with the joyful (*hilaris*) Cautes. In the Santa Prisca Mithraeum this symbolism is also expressed in the colour of the niches in which their images were placed. Cautes stands in an orange-coloured niche while Cautopates' niche is painted dark blue. Some inscriptions even describe them as 'God' (*deus*) and rightly so, since we know from the writings of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fourth century A.D.)

that the two torch-bearers form a trinity with Mithras (*Μάγοι τὰ μνημοσύνα τοῦ τριπλασίου Μίθρου τελοῦσι*). Consequently Cautes represents the position of the sun in the

Fig. 12. A shepherd, witness at the birth of Mithras

Fig. 13. Cautopates with torch pointing downward

morning (*oriens*), Mithras its course at midday (*μεσίτης*) and Cautopates its setting (*occidens*). Mithras may have been worshipped regularly at noon and we know that the sixteenth or middle day of the month was specially dedicated to him. The figure of Mithras symbolises not only the rising sun and the sun at its zenith but also the sinking orb; in this way Mithras's influence and power were made manifest each day.

The teachings of Mithras, which are steeped in astrological theories, paid much attention to the position of the

sun in the zodiac. When the sun stood in the sign of the bull—which indicates the beginning of spring—Cautes was

Fig. 14. Three heads with Phrygian caps set in a pine tree

Fig. 15. Mithras in a tree

portrayed holding the bull's head in his hand, but when Cautopates is seen with the scorpion we know that the sun has passed into that sign and autumn has begun. In a few instances, as at Santa Prisca, the two torch-bearers are placed beside an evergreen pine tree, while at Pettau a row of three cypresses, trees sacred to the Sun-god, indicate the Mithraic trinity. At Dieburg we see a tree with three branches and three heads wearing Phrygian caps (Fig. 14). These representations are to be connected with others in which Mithras is found alone and hiding in a tree, a scene which occurs both at Dieburg and Heddernheim (Fig. 15). Another clear allusion to the same trinity is a large marble triangle in Santa Prisca containing a globe at its centre. In short, the torch-bearers were so important that their images were to be found in almost every sanctuary.

10

The Legend of Mithras

(i) THE MIRACULOUS BIRTH OF MITHRAS

DECEMBER 25th was Mithras's particular festival, when the advent of the new light and the god's birth were celebrated. This birth was in the nature of a miracle, the young Mithras being forced out of a rock as if by some hidden magic power. He is shown naked save for the Phrygian cap, holding dagger and torch in his uplifted hands. He is the new begetter of light (*genitor luminis*), born from the rock (*deus genitor rupe natus*), from a rock which gives birth (*petra genetrix*). Even at this stage he is equipped for his future feats with bow and arrow, ready to perform the miracle of the striking of the rock or the miracle of the hunt. Just as the crypt of the Mithraeum is the symbol of the celestial vault, so the rock is the firmament from which light descends to earth. Sometimes, as at Dura-Europos, flames are shown shooting out from the rock's surface and even from the cap, which is often

studded with stars and, like the vault of the Mithraic grotto, was regarded as a symbol of the celestial vault.

In the tenth *yasht* of the Avesta, the hymn for Mithras,

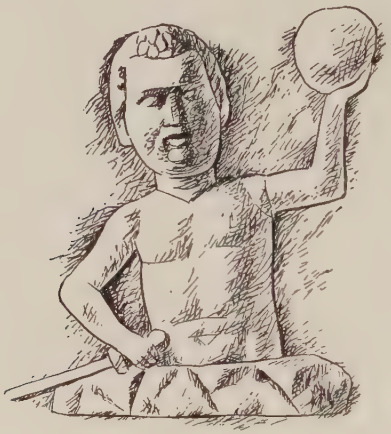

Fig. 16. Mithras at birth with globe in hand

the Persian god is described appearing in a golden glow on top of *Hara Bĕrĕzaiti*, a mythological mountain later localised in the present-day Elburz, whence he looks out over the lands of the aryans. The theory that Mithras was descended from the union of Mother Earth and Ahura-Mazda does not bear examination; Mithras is *saxigenus* and sometimes he is shown stepping proudly out of the rock, as on a relief at St Aubin in France. The rock of Mithras's birth contains both light and fire; he who is born from the rock is thus a fiery god of light. This conception is almost certainly based on a very ancient tradition dating from the time when man first discovered that both light and fire could be produced by striking a flint. Mithras's birth is a cosmic event; he holds the globe in one hand from the moment of his birth (Fig. 16) and

touches with the other the circle of the zodiac; the gods of the four winds and the four elements are all present to honour Mithras, ruler of the cosmos (*kosmokrator*).

Fig. 17. Shepherd assisting at the birth of Mithras

On some representations shepherds attend Mithras's birth (Fig. 12), but in most cases only the two torch-bearers are present, watching the event with expressions of profound amazement. On a relief at Pettau (Poetovio) they appear as servants (Fig. 17); Cautes and Cautopates carefully lift Mithras by his arms in much the same way as Venus on the Ludovisi throne is raised from the waves by two female attendants. Above this scene Saturn reclines, crowned by a winged Victory, while by his side lies a dagger which he will in due course hand to Mithras. On the Dura-Europos paintings the same god reclines on what may be intended to be clouds or a wooded mountain top and holds in his right hand a *harpē*, or short sword with

hooked point. The palm branch of victory rests above his head and corresponds to the wreath presented to him at Pettau. On a relief at Dieburg Saturn, deep in thought, is sitting on a rock holding a dagger in his right hand (Fig. 41), and on a relief at Nersae in central Italy the *harpē* is clearly visible. Saturn gives Mithras the dagger to kill the bull or, in his rôle as the divine reaper, presents him with a *harpē*. Sometimes Saturn's place at Mithras's birth is taken by the Water-god Oceanus or Neptune, and on a relief at Virunum Saturn has horns on his forehead, like Neptune, while by his side stands Amphitrite. Moreover, in some representations the birth is set close to a source of water; one such relief, now in Florence, bears the form of Oceanus. Why is it that a heavenly deity or water-god is always represented? An even more remarkable relief is to be found in the second Mithraeum at Heddernheim, where the front of the relief shows Mithras's birth while the sides are decorated with the figures of Oceanus and Caelus, accompanied by Cautes and Cautopates, and expressly described in the adjoining inscription as the gods of the waters and the heavens. Both gods are powers of creation who are present at the birth of the creative god Mithras (δημιουργός) and will later give their support to his actions. Saturn himself is called fruitful (*frugifer*); Mithras too will give fruitfulness through the killing of the bull, but he will also strike water from a rock, which will then become an eternal spring (*fons perennis*). Consequently Saturn is sometimes shown as a witness of the bull-slaying, as in the vast Santa Prisca cult-niche.

The Mithraic priests gave even more weight to Saturn than to Neptunus-Oceanus, since Saturn was equated with the Titan Kronos, who was in turn identified with Chronos, the god of Eternal Time, the Persian Zervan, and the

Greek Aion (see p. 118). Mithras too was represented as the youthful God of Time while as Sun-god he directed the course of the sun through the zodiac. In other words, Mithras is Saturn and Oceanus as well and thus the creator of both fertility and water. That is why the leader of each Mithraic community, the Father, Mithras's representative on earth, was placed under the special protection of Saturn, as can be seen at Santa Prisca; one of the attributes of the Father is a sickle (*falx*). Saturn received the wreath from the hands of Victory and this same wreath adorns many inscriptions relating to the *Pater* (compare p. 136).

(ii) THE ADVENTURES WITH THE BULL

Mithras's adventures with the bull appear almost exclusively on monuments from the regions of the Danube and the Rhine, while elsewhere interest in these episodes seems to have been relatively insignificant, or they were considered of minor importance. The actual slaying of the bull is always, of course, the principal theme and incorporates the adventures leading up to it. Only in the Mithraeum of Santa Prisca do we find, on the right-hand wall of the cult-niche, a stucco image of Mithras with his mighty arm clasped round the neck of the bull. In a relief found in a Mithraeum in the Forum Boarium Mithras is carrying the bull on his shoulders towards the cave. This representation is, as it were, a gloss on a mid-third century poem by Commodianus in which Mithras is compared with the wily Cacus who stole the cattle of Geryon from Herakles as the hero lay in a drunken slumber on the banks of the Tiber close to what later became known as the Forum Boarium. Commodianus wrote his poem in the form of an acrostic on the theme of *invictus*, invincible, and

included it in a collection of *Instructiones* (1, 13) which, in the words of W. Teuffel, is 'full of sentiments which, if not dogmatically correct, are truly Christian in their ardour'. His text gives some idea of how these two great opposing faiths of Mithraism and Christianity attacked each other:

> Invictus de petra natus si deus habetur,
> Nunc ego reticeo, vos de istis date priorem.
> Vicit petra deum, quaerendus est petrae creator.
> Insuper et furem adhunc depingitis esse,
> Cum, si deus esset, utique, non furto vivebat.
> Torrenus utique fuit et monstruosa natura,
> Vertebat boves alienos semper in antris
> Sicut et Cacus Vulcani filius ille.

If you hold him to be a god, born of stone and invincible,
Now, tell me which, then, of these two stands first.
Vanquished is the god by the stone; still to be found is the stone's creator.
In addition more yet must be added: you have also pictured him as a thief,
Laughable, because if he was a god, he would not make a living from thieving!
Terrestial was he and strange indeed his habits,
Veering their cattle from others away into the caves—
So once did Vulcan's son Cacus.

Despite what has been said above the reliefs from the Danube and the Rhine are so packed with all the exploits of Mithras that they often look like an open picture-book of his greatness; sometimes they even take the form of a triumphal arch. With his right hand he is lifting up a stone which he is about to throw at the roof in order to chase the animal out. On several reliefs from the Danube region a small boat (Fig. 23) with a second bull appears

above the building. This scene may indicate the bull in the moon, since the moon is often represented as a ship. According to Porphyry the bull was identified with the moon, 'the female helpmate of creation'. This theory corresponds with the explanation of the bull-slaying given by Lommel, who bases his argument on evidence from the Indian Veda, in which Mithras definitely carries the exhausted animal away (*Mithras taurophorus*) with its muzzle dragging along the ground. This gave the opponents of Mithraism an opportunity to interpret the scene as a cattle-theft and Mithras as a thief, and so to agree, probably unconsciously, with Porphyry who developes in *De Antro Nympharum*, 18, another complete theory about the 'cattle-stealing god'. Because the bull is identified with the moon and the moon assists in creation, Porphyry calls the souls which are created 'born of cattle' and the cattle-thieving god is 'he who secretly hears about the creation'. So Mithras appears once more as taking an active part in the process of creation and even in the creation of souls. Porphyry's reasoning, however, seems to be an over scholarly explanation of the carrying off of the bull, which is described on a group of inscriptions (in particular one on a relief from Pettau) as *transitus dei*, the passage of the god. A line of verse (dated *c.* A.D. 200 and found in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum) hints at the god's heavy load, *qui portavit umeris iuvencum* (who carried the young bull on his shoulders—see page 178), for if Mithras was to perform the great miracle he could not just find the bull and then kill it; the hero could only fulfil his mission after a mighty struggle. Mithras therefore carried the heavy bull towards the cave like Herakles bidden by Eurystheus to shoulder the Erymanthian boar, and his votaries, who wished as soldiers to achieve their particular life's mission, had to

accomplish their personal *transitus* with the same determination reinforced by the god's inspiring example. Thus, on a large relief at Neuenheim, the story of Mithras and

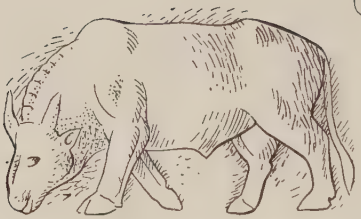

Fig. 18. Fragment of relief with grazing bull

Fig. 19. Fragment of relief with Mithras

the bull is unfolded stage by stage. First we see the bull grazing peacefully in the field (Fig. 18), but presently he is captured by Mithras and borne away on the god's shoulders, as a sheep is carried by a shepherd (Fig. 19). In this particular case Mithras's capture of the animal is not shown, but it was probably accomplished with a lasso, *taurobolium*, of which the original meaning is 'the catching of the bull'. But the wild and powerful beast is able to break away and drags Mithras with him at great speed (Fig. 20). The god, however, does not relax his grasp; he clutches the animal round the neck until in the end and with a great effort he succeeds in forcing it to the ground; the powerful bull's resistance is broken, but not so Mith-

ras's strength. He lifts the beast up, pulls its two hind legs over his shoulders and drags it towards the cave (Fig. 21). Some representations show him proudly riding on the

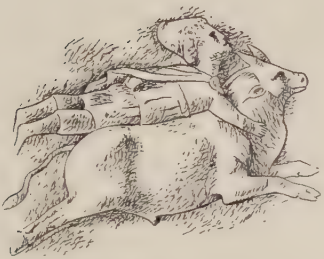

Fig. 20. Mithras catching the bull

Fig. 21. Mithras dragging away the bull

bull, holding and directing it by the sickle-shaped horns (Fig. 2). This is an echo of Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum*, 24: 'Mithras rides the bull of Aphrodite, since the bull is creator and Mithras the master of creation.' The Greek text uses the word δημιουργός, creator, which elsewhere is used to indicate Mithras himself who, as explained above, created life anew, through the act of the bull-slaying. According to astrological theories the bull moves in the sphere of the planet Venus–Aphrodite–but how far these views are consistent with the image of Mithras as rider of the bull, and whether they were originally connected with it, it is impossible to say (see p. 26).

A large relief at Dieburg adds a further representation of this exhausting struggle. As on several other Danubian

reliefs the bull is lying inside a building. In this particular case the building is a temple with a pediment decorated with the heads of three gods whose characters it is impossible to detect. Mithras is standing on a rock and is holding in his left hand a dagger and a cloth tinged with red.

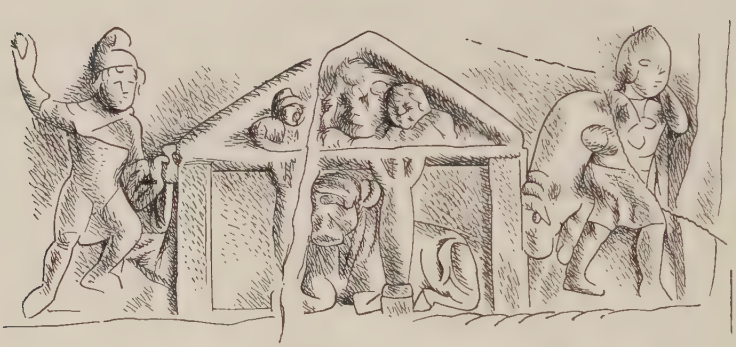

Fig. 22. Relief from Dieburg showing the fight between Mithras and the bull

Perhaps the symbolic meaning of the sign of Taurus within the courts of the sun is fundamentally the same as that of the image of the bull in a house, since the moment which heralds spring is the moment when the bull-slaying was supposed to take place. Spring is, of course, the season in which countless other cults both past and present also commemorate the miracle of the renewal of life.

FIG. 23. Relief of the bull in a boat above the bull in a house

(iii) THE MIRACLE OF THE STRIKING OF THE ROCK

A relief, illustrating Mithras's miraculous birth, found in Rome and now in the possession of Trinity College, Dublin, has already been mentioned in connection with the Sarmizegetusa Mithraeum (see p. 65 above). The inscription on this relief reads as if it were written in Mithras's own words: 'Lucius Flavius Hermadion gladly made me a present of this'. The artist commissioned by Hermadion portrayed the young god in a highly original manner. In his right hand he holds aloft a burning torch and looks excitedly towards this light, of which he himself is the personification. On the rock from which he has been born, lie a dagger, a bow and a quiver, and a single arrow is also shown separately. Bow and arrow served Mithras in two major exploits in which his unerring aim was all-important—the striking of the rock and the hunt.

The scene of the striking of the rock has only been recorded once in Rome on a painted side-panel of the Mithraeum at the Palazzo Barberini. Otherwise representations of this scene are confined to the Danube and

Rhine regions, where other illustrations of the Mithras cycle are also common. As a rule Mithras is shown seated and aiming his arrow at the rock face, before which a

Fig. 24. Portrayal of the miracle of Mithras striking the rock

figure kneels. Occasionally a second figure clasps Mithras's knee beseechingly, or stands behind the god with one hand on his right shoulder (see Fig. 24; a relief from Apulum—Alba Julia—in Rumania). There is a particularly fine representation of this scene on the side of an altar at Pettau where Mithras, standing at the ready, is aiming his arrow at the rock, in front of which a man is waiting to drink the water which will gush forth. On the other side of the altar are a bow, quiver and dagger, as in the Dublin relief. It is noticeable that not only Mithras himself but also the two subsidiary figures are dressed in oriental costume, and it seems that in this type of scene they must be intended to represent Cautes and Cautopates, the attendants at Mithras's birth. A relief from Besigheim in Germany devotes two successive scenes to this miracle. In the first a man stands catching in both hands water which flows from the rock, while Mithras is still busily engaged in taking an arrow from his quiver; immediately next to

this scene there is a repetition of it in greater detail (Fig. 25) with Mithras standing prepared with bow and arrow, one figure kneeling in front of him and another trying to

Fig. 25. Mithras with bow and arrow

catch the stream of water in his cupped hands. On both reliefs the rock is shaped like a cloud which, as has already been established, represents the celestial vault. Thus Mithras is begetting, as it were, water from heaven with his arrow, while the beseeching figures indicate that this miracle was performed during a drought from which the god delivered thirsting mankind—an interpretation reminiscent of *Exodus* 17, 5-6: 'And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.'

A sandstone relief from Dieburg stands entirely apart. Mithras, in oriental attire, is standing by an altar, holding an arrow in his right hand and in his left a bow, most of which has now been broken away from the relief; a vessel

is on the ground by his right foot. This particular representation is the only one devoted exclusively to the miracle of the striking of the rock. In every other case the incident is secondary, sometimes appearing, for example, in the background of the representation of Mithras's birth, while at Pettau it is combined with a representation of the pact between Sol and Mithras (Fig. 33). The altar shown beside Mithras on the Dieburg relief is particularly suggestive in this connection because it may have been introduced as a reminder to worshippers of the necessity for Mithras's pact with Sol in order to put an end to withering drought and refresh men and cattle alike with rain. The niche containing the representation of Mithras's birth was sometimes connected with a spring, which thus became the *fons perennis*, the eternal spring. One of the texts recently uncovered in Santa Prisca throws further light on this subject: 'A spring, within the rocks, which feeds both brothers with nectar.' 'Both brothers' can only be the figures we have encountered on the representations of the striking of the rock. By working this miracle Mithras has fed them with nectar, procured the draught of the gods for them and endowed them with immortality. The stream which springs from the rock has become therefore a source of life-giving water in which the two brothers have found immortal refreshment (*refrigerium*), an ever-present reminder of the joys in store for those who participate in the mysteries. Unfortunately this is as far as our information takes us, but in any case here again we reach a point where Mithraism and Christianity overlap, for the portrayal of Moses on early Christian sarcophagi is likewise associated with the concept of divine refreshment.

(iv) MITHRAS THE HUNTER

On the relief at Osterburken, which plays an important part in presenting the events of the Mithras legend, there is a remarkable scene (Fig. 26) above the depiction of

Fig. 26. Mithras with bow and arrow on horseback

Fig. 27. Mithras on horseback hunting in a forest of cypresses

Mithras's meal with Sol. Mithras, accompanied by a lion and followed by a page in oriental dress bearing the god's quiver on his right shoulder, looses an arrow as he rides his horse at full gallop; the quarry, however, is not shown. Among recent discoveries is a similar relief found near the Mithraeum at Neuenheim—again in Germany—(Fig. 27), in which the Persian god is riding at great speed through a forest of cypresses, his cloak flying in the wind; in his right hand he holds the celestial orb and with his left he tugs vigorously at his horse's reins. A lion and a snake are also in attendance and these figures are encountered again on the lower register of a Rumanian bull-slaying relief. Thus,

although the lion and snake symbolise fire and earth, they are nevertheless here included in the retinue of Mithras, the Rider- and Sun-god. A great number of similar representations of Mithras as a mounted horseman come from the East and in particular from Syria (as R. Dussaud has pointed out); the widely represented Thracian horseman of the Balkans was often identified with the Sun-god Apollo.

Thus the daily course of the sun is reflected not only in the image of Sol in his chariot but equally in Sol as an equestrian figure. These representations of the Rider-god Helios (*Ἥλιος ἔφιππος*) are described particularly in inscriptions from Asia Minor, and from the texts it is evident that this tradition continued until well into the Byzantine period. It seems most probable that the sculptor of the Neuenheim relief intended to portray Mithras as the Sun-god who is at the same time ruler of the cosmos (*kosmokrator*), a function indicated by the celestial orb.

There is, however, a difference between these two representations at Neuenheim and Osterburken. At the latter site the god is shown as archer as well as rider (just as, on the front of the large relief at Dieburg in the Rhineland, the god is again shown as a mounted rider). In the background of this Dieburg relief there is a tree, either cypress or pine, and Mithras, astride a galloping horse, is shooting at a hare whose long ears are just visible; three large and ferocious looking hounds are bounding forward, and on either side of Mithras, each standing upon a vessel, is a torch-bearer. Although the lion is missing from this scene, the presence of the torch-bearers lays particular stress on the elements of light and fire; for the element of earth in the form of a snake we have here instead the two vessels which are symbols of water. Behn, the first author-

ity to offer an explanation of this relief, saw a connection with the German Wotan. Because such hunting scenes had at that time been found only in Germany, the Persian and Teutonic deities were assumed to have become fused. But this conclusion has been invalidated by two paintings which came to light during the excavation of the Dura-Europos Mithraeum. Both give an identical version of Mithras as Hunter, so proving that this particular imagery gained currency in the eastern part of the Roman Empire as well as in the west. But at Dura-Europos the portrayal has been adapted to oriental taste and artistic tradition (Fig. 28). The landscape is composed of trees

Fig. 28. Mithras hunting; a wall painting at Dura-Europos

with fan-shaped tops, and plants are schematically suggested by a mere three branches. The artist, who clearly came from neighbouring Palmyra, has executed his paintings in a range of pastel tones. Mithras, shown frontally, is turning in the saddle to loose his arrows. His elegantly

accoutred horse is galloping at full speed, with the god's quiver hanging by a strap. The god himself is wearing the richly embroidered garments of a Palmyrene officer of the archers, and he is accompanied by the snake and the lion as at Neuenheim. Two deer with sickle-shaped horns, two gazelles and a boar have all been hit, and in spite of the fact that blood is streaming from their wounds they continue their flight in a last desperate attempt to escape. In the second painting the artist has produced a variation on this theme by replacing snake and boar by one small and one large lion. At Dura-Europos, a military outpost where Palmyrene archers were stationed, the followers of Mithras would wish to look up to their god as an example and also as a protector of their own weapons. There was moreover a belief to the effect that the god sought to strike at his enemies while hunting, an idea already expressed in the Avesta. At Dura-Europos he is hunting a boar, an animal commonly offered to Ahriman, the power of evil.

Hunting scenes are often to be found on tomb reliefs. It has been pointed out that among the ancients the hunt was considered to be a perfect practice ground for hardiness and endurance; philosophers regarded the struggle against the animal world 'as a victory of daring and judgment over brute force and violence'. The hunt had a religious significance as well, for dangerous beasts could only be overcome with the help of the gods and at the conclusion of the hunt a sacrifice was offered to the gods and the hunters would then partake of a repast, often of a religious nature.

Now at Osterburken, it has been noted, the hunt preceded the sacred meal. A relief at Serdica (Sofia) shows Mithras and Sol taking part in the meal with a vessel on

the ground beside them. On the right of the cave is a lion and on the left a hound and a boar. The meal and the hunt are again linked at Heddernheim and Rückingen in Germany on the reverse sides of two large reliefs, in both of which the sacred meal of Sol and Mithras is portrayed below an elaborate hunting scene. In the centre of the Heddernheim relief stands a figure, whose outline is only dimly visible, surrounded by four large hounds. Above the hounds, on the left, part of a horse's leg can still be distinguished, indicating the presence of the rider; the central figure must have been an attendant. A bull and a boar are lying peacefully in a field with a grazing sheep. The hounds take no notice of these animals and it is therefore an open question whether the bull and the boar have been struck by arrows. The bull, boar and sheep, represented as the *suovetaurilia* sacrifices on the right-hand wall of the Santa Prisca Mithraeum, here adorn the vaulted entrance of the cave where the sacred meal took place.

On a relief discovered in 1950 at Rückingen, Mithras is sitting on horseback holding a lasso in his left hand (Fig. 29), and round him in a circle are various animals—a dog, a boar, a reclining horse, a foal, another boar, a deer and an ox. Alföldi has tried to attach a special significance to the grouping of the animals, citing the circular course of the quadriga of the cosmic charioteer (see p. 169). However, there is insufficient evidence to associate these hunting scenes with the myth of the universal conflagration, and it seems preferable to explain the hunt as symbolic of Mithras's struggle against the powers of darkness (represented at Rückingen by the boar). The more harmless animals like the hare (at Dieburg), gazelle and deer (at Dura-Europos) are all indigenous animals; the bull and ox

have been added in these scenes with the object of portraying an alternative method of catching the boar. At Rückingen the bull is caught with a lasso, a point which brings us back to the significance of the *taurobolium* (see p. 82).

Fig. 29. Mithras on horseback holding a lasso in his left hand

Herodotus (1, 136) relates how the Persians instructed their children between the ages of five and twenty in three subjects only: horse-riding, archery and speaking the truth. Young Persians could follow Mithras's example as champion of truth and justice. In his rôle as rider and archer he goes to hunt against the powers of evil and his arrows never miss their target. Mithras is always successful in his adventures, ever triumphant in the struggle between good and evil. On a small panel at Dura-Europos we see that after the hunt the bull is carried on a pole by two servants—as if it were a trophy—and after the victory

over evil comes the meal where Mithras's followers may recline in company with the god.

(v) SOL AND MITHRAS

In his book on the gods of the Greeks Professor Guthrie draws particular attention to the fact that in the classical world men did not feel themselves bound to strict dogma and to those doctrines which were in fundamental agreement with one another. The association of Sol with Mithras illustrates this point admirably. With the facts at our disposal, it is not possible to build up a strictly logical theory about their relationship, or rather, if such a theory did in fact exist, it is not now readily discernible.

In many inscriptions Mithras is invoked as *deus Sol invictus*, the invincible Sun-god. Together with Cautes and Cautopates he represents the sun at the three main divisions of the day, morning, afternoon and evening. But in spite of this a Sun-god with nimbus and halo also often appears beside Mithras and, whip in hand, spurs his four fiery horses through the firmament. This Apollonian Sun, this light-bringing charioteer, is clearly to be distinguished from Mithras.

In some representations of the bull-slaying a single ray from the nimbus of Sol can be seen flashing out in the direction of Mithras. Again Sol apparently uses his messenger the raven to issue instructions for the fatal stabbing of the bull, implying that the sun was regarded as a mediator between the supreme power of good (Ahura-Mazda) and Mithras who, as bull-slayer, stood in turn as mediator (*μεσίτης*) between man and Ahura-Mazda. Thus Sol-Helios-Apollo indirectly governs Mithras's actions and participates in the bull-slaying, and so it would seem that the Sun-god is superior to Mithras and wields greater

power, but other representations, particularly from sites outside Rome, show the Sun-god kneeling or squatting before Mithras. Balkan reliefs portray Sol in this sub-

Fig. 30. Mithras confers the accolade

Fig. 31. Sol kneeling in front of Mithras

missive attitude while the Persian god puts his left hand on Sol's head and holds in his uplifted right hand an object which cannot in most cases be discerned. Sometimes it looks like a pointed cap or a drinking horn, but frequently it looks like a piece of meat, either a shoulder or a leg. The texts provide no explanation of this scene. As a rule the bull-slayer seems to be bestowing some kind of honour on Sol (Fig. 30) and in a small relief found at Bucharest Mithras is definitely placing the Phrygian cap on Sol's head.

Other scenes give the impression that the two gods are concluding an agreement. On a relief from Nersae in Italy (Fig. 31) Sol, naked, is kneeling on one knee before Mithras; in between them is a small altar. In his right hand Sol is holding a dagger, point down, and with his left he grasps Mithras's right wrist. Mithras too holds a

knife in his right hand, point upwards, and the two gods are presumably making a blood pact. On a relief from Rome we again see the two deities on either side of an altar, Mithras quite clearly gripping the wrist of the person in front of him with his left hand in order to make a small incision with a knife, thus sealing the pact with the letting of blood. On a relief from Virunum Mithras's right hand clasps Sol's in a paternal handshake (*iunctio dextrarum*), while with his left hand Mithras pats him on the shoulder in a friendly manner (Fig. 32). As a final example, a large relief at Heddernheim shows Mithras walking towards Sol as if to place the nimbus on his head.

Fig. 32. Mithras approaching Sol

Fig. 33. Mithras and Sol on either side of an altar

A second version of this scene is illustrated both in a painting in the Palazzo Barberini Mithraeum, Rome, and in a relief from Poetovio (Pettau/Ptuj) where in each case Mithras and Sol are shown standing on either side of an altar. In the example from Rome both are holding a small spit on the altar; at Poetevio (Fig. 33) both gods are hold-

ing out their hands to one another, and a spit can again be made out with small pieces of meat skewered on to it, as is still customary in Yugoslavia. The spit is being held over the altar while the raven comes to nibble at the meat, but on a painting at Dura-Europos the raven himself offers this spit for the sacred meal. It is clear, however, that the scene at Pettau is not to be regarded merely as a variant on the meal in which Sol and Mithras ultimately partake as fraternal allies, because in the Palazzo Barberini Mithraeum these two acts are portrayed on separate panels. The scene probably illustrates the formal confirmation of the pact of Sol and Mithras, an action which preceded the divine meal which itself took place before their ascent to heaven in the chariot of the sun.

The antagonism which is supposed to have existed originally between the two Sun-gods has thus been reconciled into eternal friendship. As Mithras ascends in his chariot after the conclusion of his worldly deeds, so the initiate himself can devoutly hope for his own return to the eternal sunlight.

(vi) THE SACRED MEAL AND THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

After the arduous bull-hunt and the miracle of the bull-slaying, Mithras completes his stay on earth by banqueting with Sol off the flesh of the bull. As already remarked, the paintings at Dura-Europos include two attendants dressed as torch-bearers who carry the dead bull on a pole slung between their shoulders.

The meal takes place in a cave where Mithras, in his Persian robes, reclines or sits with Sol behind a table; the relationship between the two gods is clearly a friendly one, as Mithras is sometimes seen with his arm round his com-

panion's shoulder. The most usual expression discernible in these pictures, however, is one of profound religious feeling, which can be seen in all the representations of

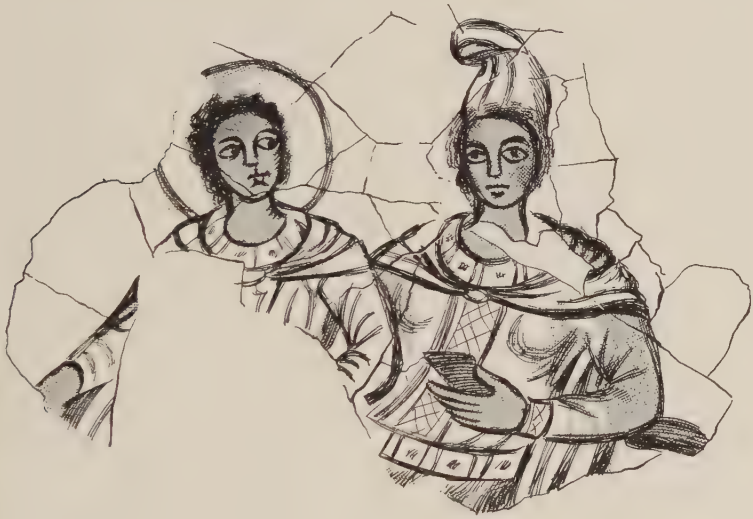

Fig. 34. Mithras and Sol

highly exalted events as, for example, in the painting at Dura-Europos (Fig. 34). The divine meal is more frequently portrayed than any other scene except the bull-slaying and sometimes the latter appears on the front of a relief which portrays the meal on its reverse. In such cases the relief was mounted on a pivot so that during the ceremonies the worshippers' attention could be drawn to one scene or the other by rotating the slab.

The meal can even be regarded as an event which takes place solely on a divine level between the two gods, Sol and Mithras. But the believers, according to certain texts, imitated the example of their deity during the ritual.

Therefore certain representations are of a mixed nature, with the initiates themselves taking part in the meal as attendants on the gods; the example and imitation of the divine meal are woven into a single whole. A third variant of the scene represents initiates partaking of the meal alone.

In order to understand the ritual of this repast we must first consider the magnificent painting on the side wall behind the left-hand bench in the Aventine Mithraeum. This painting dates from *c.* A.D. 220. In a dark vaulted grotto, lit only by the golden glow of candlelight, Sol and Mithras are reclining on a couch; before them is a small table. Sol, clad in a long red garment with a yellow belt, holds a globe in his left hand and raises his right hand in a gesture of ardent enthusiasm; his long golden locks are surrounded by a rayed nimbus and he is gazing ecstatically upwards into the heavens. Mithras, in his red cloak and Phrygian cap, is sitting beside him and has put his right hand on Sol's shoulder. On each side stands an attendant; one of them keeps the gods provided with drink, the other, wearing a raven-mask, offers an oval plate with food; he is an initiate of the Raven grade. Eight other young men, all Lions according to the inscriptions, bring gifts. They carry bread and a mixing-bowl, a cock and a bundle of tapers. Nowhere else is the Mithraic meal portrayed in such detail. The two gods have for a moment joined their earthly followers, who in their turn pay homage to their distinguished guests. In this way the divine presence is manifested while the initiates celebrate the mysteries and follow their example. The place once occupied by Mithras and Sol is now taken by their representatives, the Father of the Community and the Courier of the Sun, who during the solemnities would be wearing

the same clothes as Mithras and Sol wore before them and are furnished with the same attributes. In the Santa Prisca Mithraeum a separate bench is made for these two persons to recline upon during the celebration of the meal. The lower grades, particularly the Ravens, are in attendance to supply them with food and drink.

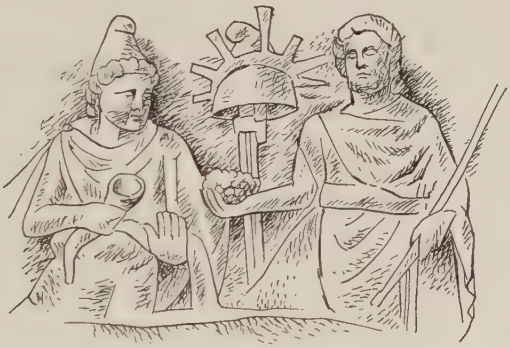

Fig. 35. Mithras and Sol at the sacred meal

On the reverse of the Mithraic relief from Heddernheim, Sol and Mithras are lying together behind the slain bull (Fig. 35). Elsewhere both gods or their followers are sometimes seen lying on the bull's skin, emphasising once again the magic power which they seek to extract from it. On the Konjic relief, the Raven and Lion, both wearing the masks of their grade, serve food and drink (Fig. 36), which in these scenes consists of bread, fruit and sometimes fish. On the Heddernheim relief the attendants, dressed as torch-bearers, are offering baskets containing bread or fruit and Sol is handing his companion a bunch of grapes, a gift which Mithras regards with awe. A *terra sigillata* bowl found at Trier and probably used at the sacred meal shows how the attendant served the bread; at

Dura-Europos we have already seen the gods receiving small pieces of meat skewered on a spit; in the representation of the repast in the Aventine Mithraeum a Lion is

Fig. 36. Meal of the Mithraists

carrying a cake in a glass dish. From the refuse-pits which are often discovered close to Mithraic sites the bones of bulls, boars, sheep and birds have been found, and the natural deduction is that normally the bull's flesh was consumed and its blood drunk. However, if no bull was available or if the animal was too costly, one either had to be content with the flesh of other animals, generally smaller domesticated breeds, or else with bread and fish as substitutes for meat, and wine for blood. 'That bread and water were used in the mysteries by initiates of Mithras, that we know, or we can get to know,' writes Justin, one of the early Church Fathers. He is careful to use the word 'water' and not 'wine', although there is certain evidence for the use of wine. In the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos the expenses of the community are scratched on the walls, and at the head of the list come the charges for meat and

wine. The bunch of grapes held in Sol's hand at Heddernheim points in the same direction (Fig. 35). One of the attendants on a relief from Caetobriga in Portugal is emptying a jug into a large mixing-bowl, while the other has dropped his torch on the ground and is offering Sol a dish with what appear to be loaves of bread on it.

All this information is once more borne out by the painting in the Aventine Mithraeum, and it is precisely this scene of the sacred meal which suffered most at the hands of the Christian iconoclasts at the end of the fourth century; the other wall was left untouched. The reason for such vehement hatred is not hard to find. According to Tertullian (*De praescr.*, 40) the meal in the Mithras cult was a 'devilish imitation of the Eucharist', and the apologist adds that the initiates of Mithras enacted the resurrection as well (*⟨Mithra⟩ imaginem resurrectionis inducit*—see p. 26). They firmly believed that by eating the bull's flesh and drinking its blood they would be born again just as life itself had once been created anew from the bull's blood. This food and drink were supposed not only to give physical strength but also to bring salvation to the soul which would in time achieve rebirth and eternal light.

Authors like Kristensen and Loisy have concluded from this belief that the bull was Mithras who had offered himself as sacrifice, and that the believers then consumed the divine body and drank his blood as in the Dionysiac mysteries, but neither the temples nor the inscriptions give any definite evidence to support this view and only future finds can confirm it.

Justin records that on the occasion of the meal the participants used certain formulae (*μετ' ἐπιλόγων τινῶν*) comparable with the ritual of the Eucharist, and in this connection mention may be made of a mediaeval text,

published by Cumont, in which the word of Christ is set beside the sayings of Zarathustra. The Zardasht speaks to his pupils in these words: 'He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation. . . .' Compare this with Christ's words to his disciples: 'He who eats of my body and drinks of my blood shall have eternal life.' In this important Persian text lies the source of the conflict between the Christians and their opponents, and though of later date it seems to confirm Justin's assertion.

After Mithras had accomplished his miraculous deeds he was said to have been carried up into the heavens in a chariot. Some reliefs show him running behind the Sun-god's chariot which is drawn by two or four horses (Fig. 43), whom Helios-Sol controls by pulling on the reins or spurring them on with his whip. As a rule Sol is shown with a halo round his head and virtually naked except for a short cloak round his shoulders which flutters in the wind. Sometimes the sculptor shows the chariot's passage heavenwards, as for example on the relief at Virunum (Fig. 37) where Hermes-Mercury, recognisable by two small wings on his head and his magic wand (*caduceus*), points the way. Reliefs from the Danube region, however, show Mithras stepping quietly into a chariot bound not heavenwards but towards the Ocean, which is represented by the figure of a reclining and bearded god, the lower part of whose body is draped in a cloak, and whose left arm rests on a water jar. Occasionally the Ocean is represented schematically by undulating lines. In the Dieburg relief of the scene the artist has surrounded Oceanus with a group of nymphs (Fig. 38) and placed him beneath a representation of the myth of Phaëthon, who had come to

ask Helios for his chariot (Fig. 66). Above this figure's head a billowing cloth can be made out, a feature linking it with the reclining figure in the cult-niche of the Santa

Fig. 37. Mithras in a chariot ascending into heaven

Prisca Mithraeum (see plate opposite p. 33) where a velum is draped over the god's head. On the Danube reliefs the body of Oceanus is encirled by a snake, its head pointing menacingly in the direction of the horses. The Water-god seems to combine in himself attributes of the Time-god as well as the God of Heaven, and it seems likely that this combination is a reflection of the time when the God of Heaven and the Water-god were regarded as one.

When Christian artists needed to portray on their sarcophagi the soul's ascent to heaven, they used the theme of Elijah's translation to heaven in 'a chariot of fire, and

horses of fire' (2 Kings, 2, 11). The inspiration for this theme was the extant representations of Mithras's ascent to heaven in a sun-chariot. Oceanus is, however, replaced by a personification of the River Jordan.

Fig. 38. Oceanus surrounded by nymphs

II

The Mithraic Pantheon

We have seen that in the Mithraic teachings two great powers are opposed to each other, Ahura-Mazda, guardian of the realm of light, and Ahriman, master of the domain of darkness. Above them stands the awe-inspiring Zervan, the God of Time, to whom, as to *Fatum* or Fate, both powers are subject. Sometimes Zervan is portrayed as a youthful god like Mithras himself, thus giving expression to the belief that Mithras was the Time-god reborn, a second Kronos-Saturn. Plutarch on the other hand calls Mithras a mediator (*μεσίτης*), and as such he occupies a central position between the two worlds of light

and darkness, of good and evil. He thus plays a part similar to the 'spirit' (*spiritus*). According to certain gnostic sects he assists in the fight against evil until victory has been achieved and forms the link between the realm of pure light and the world of man. This theory faithfully follows those Iranian conceptions which were incorporated into the mysteries of the Magi.

Fig. 39. Kronos-Saturn handing over the rule to Jupiter

Fig. 40. Saturn on a wall-painting at Dura

Traditional Greco-Roman mythology provides some characters for the legend. There are, for example, various representations of the figure of Kronos-Saturn transferring his divine dominion to his successor Jupiter by presenting him with thunderbolts and sceptre (Fig. 39). The act takes place over an altar as if the gods were ratifying the transference of power by a sacrifice. The Golden Age (*aurea aetas*), so highly praised in poetry and prose, has

passed but will return again when the cycles of time have run their appointed course. That Chaos once preceded Saturn is shown on a scene pictured inside the leaf-shaped border of a large relief at Osterburken.

Fig. 41. Saturn sitting on a rock, a knife in his right hand

Fig. 42. Saturn leaning on one arm, thunderbolts in his hand

During the rule of Jupiter, who obviously takes over the rôle of the Iranian Ahura-Mazda, Saturn continues to appear in the Mithraic legend. At Dura-Europos he is shown with dignified mien and with a sceptre in his hand and his head covered by a cloth (Fig. 40). On a relief at Neuenheim he is reclining, leaning on one arm and holding his thunderbolts in the other hand (Fig. 42), while the Dieburg relief shows him sitting on a rock with a knife in his right hand (Fig. 41). The connection between Saturn and Mithras is very clearly indicated on several other

representations. Sometimes he is shown handing Mithras the dagger or a sickle with a barbed hook (*harē*) and sometimes he is present at the bull-slaying, when the great miracle of the rebirth of nature takes place. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Father of the initiates, who was regarded as Mithras's deputy on earth, was believed to be under the protection of the planet Saturn (see p. 153).

Fig. 43. Relief, possibly portraying the young Mithras before Saturn

There is a rather puzzling representation on a relief from Pettau (Fig. 43). On a rock sits a god, only partly covered by a cloak, and in his left hand he holds a long

staff. Before him stands a youth shyly raising his right hand to his mouth. It is not impossible that this portrays the young Mithras in the presence of Saturn, but on the other hand it may represent the young Phaëthon requesting from his father Helios the favour of being allowed to drive the chariot, in which case the scene offers an important parallel to the great relief from Dieburg (Fig. 66).

Fig. 44. Battle between Jupiter and Titans on a wall-painting at Dura

When Jupiter ruled the gods, his major task was to repulse the rebellious Titans. This battle with the giants is common in Mithraic representations in which these fearful monsters are seen attacking Jupiter with great boulders; but, as is shown in a panel at Dura-Europos (Fig. 44), they are eventually overcome by Jupiter and fall powerless into Tartarus. In the Mithraeum of Santa

Prisca a small marble statue of a giant was found; it was painted purple, the sombre colouring of the realm of darkness, and it is obvious that the Mithraists saw in the gigantomachy the struggle of Ahura-Mazda against the satellites of Evil. Mithras himself has to hunt them out (see p. 89) and this explains why, in some inscriptions, Mithras is mentioned simultaneously with Jupiter. Thus Mithraism sought to establish through classical mythology a link with Iranian teachings, and both Gnosis and Manicheeism are also connected with this story of the struggle between light and darkness, told in the Bundahishn.

FIG. 45. Eagle on globe, symbol of the power of Jupiter

But at the same time Jupiter was still considered the mighty ruler of Olympus, the Lord of Heaven, and at Heddernheim his symbol appears as a globe decorated with the seven stars, the planets and two bands of the zodiac, while a powerful eagle perches on the globe with wings outstretched, holding the thunderbolts in its claws. The great German reliefs make a point of showing Jupiter

enthroned or standing in the midst of other Olympian gods who are assembled in two separate groups. Franz Cumont has stressed the relationship of these deities with similar figures in Iranian religion. Although this is perhaps sometimes the case, it seems doubtful whether the Mithraists themselves always appreciated the connection, and there is insufficient evidence from Mithraic sources to support this claim. In fact, it seems likely that the Olympian pantheon was absorbed as a whole into Mithraism, which adapted itself to the concepts of the contemporary Hellenistic world. Only when we see individual representations dedicated to the various deities can we make any valid attempt to investigate the particular causes for their erection. For example, no separate portrayal of Hera-Juno has been found in any sanctuary. Hera, the consort of Zeus, is always shown in the company of the other gods, and though she may be assimilated to Spenta-Armaiti, meaning the earth, her presence may be interpreted in terms of philosophical reflections on a play of words, e.g. Hera–Aer, meaning air.

There is clearly a special reason for the worship of Apollo in the Mithras cult. The key factor here is his rôle as a solar diety rather than guardian of the Muses. Some inscriptions equate him with Mithras, and the figure of Helios, with whom Mithras is so closely connected, is sometimes completely Apollonian in character. In southern Gaul, where Apollo was known as a physician, Mithraism with its gift for adaptation credited Mithras too with healing powers.

A representation of the Time-god from Ostia also incorporates Vulcan's symbols, the hammer and tongs. This dual character emerges from the element of fire which is expressed in Aion as well as in Vulcan; there is no

Sol; lead plaque from the Santa Prisca Mithraeum

Sol; marble inlay from the Santa Prisca Mithraeum

Relief of Mithras with the dedicators from Dura-Europos

need to relate Vulcan to the Iranian Atar (see p. 42).

Diana (Artemis-Luna, the moon), Apollo (Helios-Sol, the sun), Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn are represented as planets, as protectors of the seven grades (see p. 153), and as patrons of the seven days of the week. We often find, especially in the Mithraea of the provinces of Germania (Germany) and Gallia (France), separate representations dedicated to Hermes-Mercury, who was held in great esteem by the Gauls as the god of commerce and prosperity. In some inscriptions Mithras is equated with Mercury, an attempt by the initiate to emphasise the common attributes of the two gods as patrons of the traveller and guides on the final voyage to eternity.

In A.D. 155 Hedychrus, head of the community at Merida, erected a magnificent image of Mercury. The god has wings on his feet and sits, his left hand resting on a lyre, on a rock over which a richly pleated cloak is spread. In a Mithraeum at Stockstadt (Germany) there is a statue of Hermes-Mercury with the child Dionysus in his arms which recalls the famous work of Praxiteles. Dionysus or Bacchus was the god of wine. He was widely worshipped throughout the Graeco-Roman world and his cult had great influence in the Empire. A Mithraic altar in the temple at Pettau has on its base the Dionysiac motif of a vessel entwined with vines on whose rim a panther rests its paws (Fig. 46). In the Dionysiac cult worshippers or both sexes, the Bacchantes and Maenads, came under the influence of the delicious wine which instilled in them a state of uncontrollable ecstasy. When they ate the flesh of goats which, in their rapture, they tore to pieces alive, they believed that they were consuming the god himself, just as they believed the wine to be his blood. The Mithraists were more controlled and austere in their ritual. Their

worship resembled that of the followers of Dionysus only in so far as both cults used wine to facilitate the passage into the hereafter.

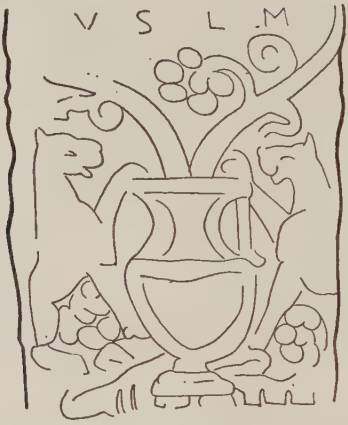

Fig. 46. Dionysiac motif on the base of a Mithraic altar

Not unexpectedly there were in the Mithraic pantheon a number of gods of Eastern origin who were thus by their very nature related. In the sanctuary at Koenigshoffen, for example, there is a dedication to Attis, the beloved of Cybele. Sometimes a Mithraic community was established in the neighbourhood of a temple dedicated to this Phrygian goddess whose cult had been officially recognised in Rome from 204 B.C. She came, of course, from the land of the Trojans, and the descendants of the Trojan Aeneas and his son Iulus were the ancestors of the Romans and in particular of the Julian *gens* or clan. It is significant too to note that reliefs of Mithras have been found in the Aventine temple of the Syrian Jupiter Dolichenus.

In some representations of the Mithraic legend the somewhat strange figure of Atlas appears. A relief at Osterburken (Fig. 47) shows him on one of the side panels

Fig. 47. Atlas with a female figure, possibly representing the earth

Fig. 48. Atlas bearing the heavy burden of the heavens

accompanied by a female figure, probably intended to be a personification of the Earth (*Tellus*). At Neuenheim (Germany) Atlas is seen kneeling on one knee with the heavy burden of the heavens on his shoulders (Fig. 48) and there is a rather unusual variation of this theme on one panel of a painting in the Barberini Mithraeum in Rome where Atlas, again on one knee, is pressing his left hand downward on to the ground and touching the heavens with his right. Two cypress trees flank the scene. All these representations seem to be of the Greek Atlas, since he is shown supporting the heavens, but in spite of this basic point of similarity there are considerable differences between the figures; the bearer of the heavens is dressed like Mithras

and he is shown wearing a Phrygian cap—he is in fact none other than Mithras himself supporting the vault of heaven (*ὠμοφόρος*). From the moment of his birth Mithras held the globe as *kosmokrator* (ruler of the cosmos) and supported the course of the signs of the Zodiac with his right hand (as in the relief from Trier). It seems therefore hardly logical to follow Cumont's suggestion and relate the Atlas of Mithraism with Manichean doctrine. In the teachings of Mani, Atlas is he who, according to Augustine (*Contra Faustum*, xv, 6), 'carries the world on his shoulders and who supports it with both arms while kneeling on one knee' while the *Splenditenens* carries the light-giving firmament. We may conclude that the figure of Atlas was adopted into the Mithraic cult from Greek mythology because, among other things, Atlas served to stress both the significance of Mithras's task as bearer of the heavens and the power derived from this junction.

We can now see the diversity of the deities who found their way into the Mithraic cult. The cult's long and complex history explains their several presences, but at the same time the process also constituted an attempt to make the cult into the one genuinely all-embracing world religion.

12

The God of Infinite Time

In various Mithraic temples there have been found representations of a monstrous figure (according to Hieronymus a *monstruosum portentum*), generally with a lion's head and a human body entwined by a snake. On none of

these, however, is there an inscription to tell us precisely which deity is portrayed. Several attempts have been made, particularly in more recent years, to equate this figure with Ahriman, the god of evil, a suggestion made by Professor R. Zaehner of Oxford and accepted, with reservations, by the Belgian scholar of Persian, Duchesne-Guillemin. There are, it is true, some dedicatory inscriptions to Ahriman, but they are carved on altars and only three of them are recorded, one each in Rome, England and Austria. They were obviously intended to placate the god of evil and to implore him to avert his magic force, and they must have been inscribed by sorely troubled followers of Mithras who preferred to invoke Ahriman himself rather than place complete trust in their own god who, ultimately and inevitably, was to conquer evil. To us it would seem odd to find an altar dedicated to the devil in a Christian church, but to the ancient way of thinking this was not unusual and even sacrifices of wild boars were made to pacify the malicious Ahriman.

For various reasons the present writer cannot agree with this not altogether new interpretation. To quote one particular objection: it seems remarkable that a similar deity, referred to as Aion and hence a god of time, is depicted in the gnostic and hermetic world, in magical papyri and on gems. The more one studies this mysterious character, the more one becomes convinced that Cumont's earlier explanation is right. The lion-headed figure is the Time-god called Aion by the Greeks and Zervan in Persian literature.

As far as the Persian texts are concerned, three different aspects of the Time-god must be distinguished. According to the orthodox teaching of Zarathustra, Zervan is a creature of Ahura-Mazda, the God of Good. According to

a second theory, however, there were originally two archetypes, that of Good and that of Evil. A separate Sassanid sect regarded Zervan Akarana, Infinite Time, as the cause and the source of all things. Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman both sprang from Zervan and were subject to him, and the followers of this cult called themselves Zervanists. It seems plausible that the same Zervan, after having undergone all kinds of foreign influences, was admitted into the Mithraic pantheon and that the figure with the lion's head is none other than Zervan who, by means of a pun on Chronos (Time), was identified in the Greek texts with Kronos and, in the Roman world, with Saturn. This god is mostly portrayed in a stiff hieratic pose, with legs close together. Sometimes he is shown nude, though often his sex is disguised by a loin-cloth or by an enveloping snake, as if it were intended either to leave the deity's sex vague or to convey that both sexes were united in him, and that he was capable of self-procreation (Fig. 49). In between the coils of the snake, which often winds itself, significantly, seven times round the god, are sometimes seen the signs of the zodiac. The horrifying figure usually has a lion's head with flowing mane and wide-open mouth showing threatening protruding teeth. For even greater effect the mouth is sometimes painted red and the gullet is hollowed out. A statue from Saida in Africa has an opening made in its head, and it is highly likely that this was intended to take a burning torch. The statue would thus appear to breathe fire and so inspire even more respect for the god than his dread visage alone could evoke. In one example he is holding two torches, while a long-pointed flame shoots out of his mouth and fuses with the flames of the burning altar beside him. An unknown author records in an essay on Saturn that he 'is sometimes represented

with the appearance of a snake because of excessive cold, and at other times with a wide open lion's mouth on account of scorching heat'. Sometimes this strange

Fig. 49. Zervan, encircled by a snake

creature is carrying a key in both hands, a pointer to a connection with Janus, the ruler of the *ianus*, the gateway to the underworld of which he possessed the keys. Finally, parallels have been drawn between Saturn and Sarapis, the Egyptian deity of the realm of the dead, and he is in some way related to certain Syrian figures who are found entwined by snakes.

To sum up: the equation of Kronos with Saturn is a Greco-Roman conjunction, the addition of the key-carrying Janus is a Roman contribution, there are Egyptian influences involving Sarapis and other deities from the Nile, similarities with Atargatis represent Syrian elements. If we wish to draw any final conclusions or try to find the ultimate significance of this God of Infinite Time, we must first of all be clear in our minds that Mithraism, like the classical world in general, was not based on hard and fast dogmas, but would shift its focus from period to period and under changing circumstances. It is as though we were listening to a performance of a concerto in which the soloist interprets a particular passage in accordance with his own personal artistic taste and understanding. Therefore we must beware of trying to relate, or reduce to a common denominator, all the different characteristics which we shall now proceed to discuss.

(i) KRONOS-SATURN

This god always has a snake wound round his body and sometimes the signs of the zodiac are seen in the spaces between its coils. He often has four wings, one pair pointing upward and the other downward (Fig. 49). On the paintings in the Barberini Mithraeum Saturn is shown, as is often the case, standing on a globe, and it is specially interesting to note that the Time-god is here surrounded by the signs of the zodiac which decorate the vault of the cave where the bull-slaying is set.

The sevenfold windings of the snake are definitely connected with the planets and the coils themselves indicate the course of the sun through the zodiac. The sun has thus become part of the god; he is the sun determining time in its course. He dominates the zodiac and as such is

Chronos, Time. But he is also the ruler over the four winds, represented by his four wings. He is known to order the seasons too, and again he does this both in his

Fig. 50. Statue of the Time-god at Castel Gandolfo

rôle as Sol and in his rôle as Time. We are reminded of the figure of Caelus, the god of heaven, who is depicted on an altar at Carnuntum surrounded by the Wind-gods and the seasons (see p. 60). Arnobius, writing about A.D. 295, makes an apparent allusion to the lion's devouring mouth: 'We observe amidst your gods one with the terrifying wild head of a lion, besmeared with pure minium (red-lead)',

(*Adversus nationes*, VI, 10). A statue from Castel Gandolfo (Fig. 50) even has lions' heads on its stomach and knees. The lion is undoubtedly an allusion to the all-devouring fire, while the three lions perhaps indicate the threefold character of the sun figure. Arnobius calls the god *frugifer* (fruitful), probably thinking of the identification of Chronos-Kronos with the Roman Saturn.

The lion's head on the stomach of the statue from Castel Gandolfo recalls a second statue from Merida (see plate opposite p. 161) where the god again has a lion's head on his chest. He is shown, however, not as an awesome figure but as a youth and we may unhesitatingly detect an identification with Mithras himself who, in another representation originally at Merida (see p. 56), is shown standing with a lion crouching at his feet. The fire-symbolism of the Lion grade in the cult, the Lion with the fire-shovel as attribute, is definitely related to this figure. It is interesting that a statue from Strasbourg shows the Time-god holding a fire-shovel in his hand, a reminder that at the end of time all will be consumed in an overwhelming conflagration. Thus the god with the lion's head is the symbol of devouring time.

(ii) THE SYRIAN ELEMENT

The goddess Atargatis was worshipped at Hierapolis in Syria. She was portrayed in the same stiff attitude as the Time-god and her body was always encircled by a snake. A mummy-like figure found at Rome in a Syrian sanctuary on the Janiculum is also connected with the statues we have been discussing. It is a bronze of a youth, entwined by a serpent whose head rests upon the head of the god. This statue was discovered by Gauckler in an octagonal hall, which must have some symbolic significance, and he

identified it as Atargatis. In this context he referred to a text of Macrobius (fifth century A.D.), who described in his *Saturnalia* (I, 17, § 67) two statues erected on either side of the bearded Sun-god. These statues, two female deities again entwined by snakes, had originally stood at Hierapolis. Macrobius writes that 'the portrayal of the snake indicates the rounded course of the star'. Evidently this star is none other than the sun. But Gauckler was mistaken in one point for the statue from the Roman sanctuary is male. According to the most recent interpretation it represents the Syrian Dionysus-Adonis who, like his father Hadad, has connections with the sun.

(iii) THE ORPHIC ELEMENT

Representations of the birth of Mithras where the god, entwined by a serpent, is surrounded by the signs of the zodiac and the four Wind-gods (as at Trier) provide a link between Kronos-Saturn and Mithras. Mithras's legs are usually pressed together and still fixed in the rock. On a relief at Modena (see plate opposite p. 160) there is a representation of Mithras's birth as Time-god which differs considerably from the iconography we have so far examined. With his customary insight Franz Cumont has drawn certain conclusions from this scene. Originally the relief was dedicated by Felix and his wife Euphrosyne. As will be noted presently, Felix was a member of an Orphic sect, but he later became *pater* of a group of Mithraic initiates and when he dedicated this relief to his new god, he erased the name of his wife since women could not be admitted to the cult. But her name, though not clear, is still legible.

It is strange that Felix should have used the same relief first as an Orphic and later as a follower of Mithras. The

relief shows a naked youth standing upright with two long wings attached to his shoulders and a half-moon visible behind him. In his right hand he holds the thunderbolts and in his left a long staff. His hoof-shaped feet are resting on one half of a burning cone, and the other half is above his head. The figure is entwined by a snake with its head on top of the upper part of the cone. A lion's head is drawn on the youth's chest and on either side of it the heads of a ram and a goat. This imposing figure is surrounded by an elliptical band in which are portrayed the twelve signs of the zodiac, while in the corners of the relief are the heads of the four Wind-gods.

The similarities between this relief and a statue from Merida in Spain are striking (see plate opposite p. 161): the youthful figure, the serpent and the lion's head on the chest are all here. But there are also important points of difference such as the hoof-shaped feet and the blazing cones. The hooves are reminiscent of the rustic god pan whose name means 'all' and was assimilated to Phanes, meaning 'rays'. This Phanes has been compared and identified with Mithras. According to the Orphic doctrine Phanes is a youthful god of light and was born from an egg, the two half-cones constituting the egg from which he springs. This egg was laid by Time; hence the son resembles his father Chronos and is portrayed as the Time-god. Occasionally Phanes wears golden wings and, as Zeus, he carries thunderbolts and a staff. The zodiac and the coils of the serpent refer again to the yearly course of the sun, and the three heads of lion, ram and goat indicate the astrological influence.

This fusion between Orphism and Mithraism is not confined solely to Rome. In a Mithraeum of the third century A.D. at Housesteads (Borcovicium) on Hadrian's

Wall a stone relief was found showing Mithras's birth from an egg, and the scene is surrounded by the signs of the zodiac. Mithras, like the youthful Phanes, shows characteristics of Chronos on representations from the north of England. He who at Sarmizegetusa was called 'the begetter of light' (*genitor luminis*—see p. 75), was given at Housesteads the title *saecularis*, eternal, a word related to *saeculum*, Aion, *Aevum*, the stem of such words as 'coeval'. In other words, Mithras is the successor of Saturn whose celebrations ended in Rome on December 24th, the day before the young Mithras, the new Saturn, was born from the rock as god of light. Therefore the Father of the Mithraists, representative on earth of Mithras, was placed under the protection of the planet Saturn (see p. 153).

(iv) EGYPTIAN INFLUENCE

From Alexandria we know an Egyptian Time-god called by the Greek name of Aion (*Aevum*). He was closely related to the goddess Kore, as is clear from an account by Epiphanius (*Adv. Haeres*, II, 22, 8) who says that, on the night of the fifth of January, approximately at cock-crow, a statue of Aion was brought by torchlight out into the open from a subterranean sanctuary dedicated to Kore. To the accompaniment of pipes and tambourines the statue was carried seven times round the temple and then returned to its place. According to Epiphanius this ceremony signifies that on that night Aion was brought into the world by Kore. The Time-god was born, and this conception is closely related to the Modena scene which we have just discussed. But in Alexandria the Egyptian Aion was very differently portrayed; the god was shown seated and naked, his head, hands and knees decorated with gold

'seals'. We can see a connection between the Egyptian Aion and a statue from the Via Zanardelli in Rome, found at the foot of the Aventine. A god, standing on a marble base and wearing only a short loin-cloth, is encircled by a snake, whose head rests on the god's; in both hands, which are pressed close to his body, he holds the Egyptian *ankh*, the sign of life. The head is missing, but two lappets indicate that it was originally covered by a headcloth (*klafi*). Beside him stands a goddess, a smaller figure wrapped in a garment over which a fringed cloak is draped. In her right hand she probably held a rattle (*sistrum*), which recalls Isis. These examples are of purely Egyptian inspiration, but this influence is translated into Mithraic terms in a statue found in the Pope's country residence at Castel Gandolfo, where once was a villa belonging to the Emperor Domitian (Fig. 50). This statue represents a standing figure of Chronos with lion's head and four wings attached to his shoulders. He wears a short loin-cloth like the Alexandrian Aion from the Via Zanardelli. A very remarkable feature is the fact that he has four arms, an eye on his chest and grim-looking lions' heads on his knees and stomach. This time there is no snake about his body, but two serpents are to be seen creeping upwards on either side of him, one along a tree-trunk and the other along the arms of a seat behind him. A three-headed Cerberus sits by his left foot and a water-snake or *hydra* and a lion's head are visible on the tree-trunk.

In this statue we find various characteristics of the Mithraic Aion, such as the lion's head and the eye on the chest. The lion and hydra probably symbolise the antithesis between fire and water, the four wings and four arms the directions of the four winds. Professor R. Pettaz-

zoni has shown that there is a connection between Cerberus and the Egyptian Sarapis, the god of fertility and the realm of the dead. Macrobius, whose *Saturnalia*, a work tinged with syncretistic theories, dates from the end of the fourth century A.D., explains (I, 20, 15) the three heads of Cerberus as an allusion to Time: the lion's head pointing to the present, the wolf's to the past and the dog's to the future. Although Cerberus is generally given three dog's heads, the Castel Gandolfo statue has the heads described by Macrobius.

In the Castel Gandolfo statue we find features recalling the Egyptian god Anubis (who has a dog's head and was identified with Chronos), the so-called 'Pantheistic Bes' (who also has lions' heads on his knees), Sarapis and the Alexandrian Aion. The sculptor who created the Italian piece must have been deeply influenced by Egyptian conventions and his creation was accepted by the Mithraists.

(v) FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON AION

A statue of Aion from Ostia, now in the Vatican, shows a gradual attempt to establish a universal and all-embracing divinity by ascribing a variety of attributes to the god. On his chest are Jupiter's thunderbolts flanked by two keys, and beside his feet are the hammer and tongs of Vulcan, the magic wand (*caduceus*) of Mercury, the cock of Aesculapius and the pine-cone of Attis. The keys indicate Janus, the Roman god who, as gate-keeper of heaven, opens the gates at sunrise and closes them again at sunset. According to Marcus Messala, a consul of 53 B.C., Janus was the same as Aion. Macrobius goes further and says that Janus created and ruled the Universe and that his four heads symbolize his power over the four winds of the cosmos. In his important work on Hermeticism, Festu-

gière has recently pointed out that Messala's views correspond with Aristotle's.

This brings us to the question of the place of Aion in Greek philosophy. Here the essential significance is life-force, the vital spirit. On the one hand he is identified with the heavens or the cosmos, on the other he is the creator of the absolute, eternal and divine nature. It is with this concept in mind that we must read the inscription on a statue of Aion found at Eleusis and dedicated in the time of Augustus: 'to the might of Rome and the perpetuation of the mysteries'. This Aion is a divine character who 'by his holy nature remains ever the same, who has no beginning or end, undergoes no change and who is the begetter of the divine nature'. The character of Aion, who is invested with such power that he has united in himself the might of all the other gods, explains the many invocations to him in occult writings and the magic significance of his portrayal on intaglios. He is sometimes represented as a god with a lion's head, a globe and a whip in his left hand, encircled by a snake biting its own tail; plainly the globe and whip indicate the sun, and the snake eternity. In a papyrus now in Paris, Aion appears as the god of fire and light; this god of light is none other than Helios; and Helios is identified with Mithras.

According to Festugière the different aspects of Aion were linked. From the second century A.D. it was equally possible for 'the Great God of the pagan world to be the God of the world below or of the world above or to be the Sun or an All-God or finally to be a subservient power of the Higher God'. Festugière's theory gains further support when we consider the place of Aion in the Mithraic community.

Cult-niche in the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos

Marble relief of Mithras, found in Rumania in 1958

Bronze plaque of Mithras now in Budapest

13

Initiation into the Mysteries

SEVERAL features of the Mithraic initiation cermonies, by which the novice was integrated into the community, are to be found among the primitive peoples of Australia, Africa and America today. Among these tribes initiation generally takes place at puberty. After severe trials to test the youth's courage and stamina, he is admitted into a secret society, religious or otherwise. He is separated from the fond attentions of his mother and must thenceforward stand on his own. In short, from an adolescent he becomes a man and acquired not only certain rights but also an equivalent set of duties. After this ordeal he belongs to the 'club' and has to safeguard its secrets carefully, for they must never be divulged to outsiders, least of all to women. As members of one large family, the initiates will assist each other and will in their turn be helped by their guardian deity both in this life and in the life to come—if they believe that there is such a life.

It is practically certain that those who were going to be initiated into the Mithras cult were first instructed for a certain period as novices of some kind as preparation for the solemn ceremony to come. For this purpose they had to address themselves to the leader of the Mithraic community (Tertullian, *Apol.* 8: '*Atquin volentibus initiari moris est, opinor, prius patrem illum sacrorum adire, quae praeparanda sint describere*'; *Ad Nat.*, I, 7: '*Sine dubio enim initiari volentibus mos est prius ad magistrum sacrorum vel patrem adire*'.) Unfortunately the nature of this training is unknown. It may be that the myths of the origin of the universe and of the creation of the world and of man were

explained, or that the novices were taught the sacred hymns and chants or even the liturgical language. The secrecy which is characteristic of the cult makes it improbable that so much would have been revealed to a layman, although it is quite possible that a more or less official explanation was given to the initiate concerning the elementary principles, which would have been in the nature of an open secret by contrast with the jealously guarded secrets of the actual proceedings at the ceremonies.

Father Nolan, to whom we owe the thorough investigation of the Mithraic sanctuary under San Clemente in Rome, thought it even possible to speak of a Mithraic 'school'. Next to the entrance hall of this Mithraeum, which is found deep under the ground in a room attached to a distinguished Roman house, lies a small hall with seven niches in the wall. There were also some paintings and, what was of the greatest interest to the excavator, a brick platform along three sides. The niches would seem to indicate the worship of the seven planets and the platforms could have served as a sort of school desk, where the pupils sat listening to their teacher. Nevertheless, the paintings in this room do not seem to point to the Mithraic cult, and it is still very doubtful if this small hall, which was connected by a door to the entrance hall of the sanctuary, was used for the service. It is just as likely that it was a simple meeting-place.

Neither written nor archaeological evidence has been found to tell us more about the form of preparation for initiation, but about the initiation proper we have fortunately some scraps of information. A Florence papyrus gives these details:

In the name of the god, who has divided the earth from the heavens, light from darkness, the day from night, the world from

chaos, life from death and creation from destruction, beyond all doubt and in sincere good faith I swear to observe the secrecy of the mysteries, which will be bestowed on me by the most God-fearing Father Serapion and by the most venerable hallowed Herald Ka(merion?), to whom this task falls, and by my fellow initiates and most beloved Brethren. For which cause being true to my oath, I hope for all prosperity, but I commit myself also to all things contrary should I disclose any of this.

Thus before his initiation the initiate had to take a solemn oath, a *sacramentum*, that he would reveal nothing of what was to be imparted to him. We learn, moreover, that the initiation was performed by two dignitaries, who possessed the title of Father and Herald. After the ceremony he would be considered the brother (*frater*) of the other initiates and the son of the Father. The text goes on to tell us that in order to be recognised by the Father, he has to be tattooed, in other words branded on both hands. On several portraits, even on portraits of emperors, these tattoo marks are clearly visible, but on the forehead, in place of the hands.

The initiates had first to undergo severe trials, and a number of fragmentary scenes, preserved in the grotto at Capua, convey to us something of the fears they experienced. In one of the scenes a *mystagogus* in charge of the initiates, dressed in a white tunic with red borders, is pushing a naked initiate by the shoulders (Fig. 51). The novice has his eyes bound; he is still blind and cannot yet see the secrets of the mysteries. Very unsteadily and slowly he advances with his hands outstretched, not knowing where his guide is going to take him. Next we see him still blindfolded, with hands clasped, kneeling in front of the *mystagogus* while behind him a priest is approaching with a sword or stick. In another representation the novice is

kneeling on one knee with a sword on the ground beside him, and this time the *mystagogus* is standing behind him and placing both hands on his head (Fig. 52). There are

Fig. 51. Representation of the initiation into the mysteries

Fig. 52. A second representation of the initiation into the mysteries

other people present at this ritual, but their function is obscure. Elsewhere the novice is lying on the ground as if dead, presently to be given symbolic new life. Then there is yet another ceremony: the *mystagogus* presses with full force on the shoulders of the kneeling novice who is almost pushed over forward, but a third figure with outstretched hands is walking towards him. Another scene shows the same priest, recognisable by his red tunic, performing some rite which is very difficult to interpret; he is holding a stick or a sword close to a round object, possibly a loaf of bread or a garland, which is lying on the

ground just in front of the novice, who is kneeling with his hands folded together under his chin. The *mystagogus* is standing behind him with one foot on his calves (Fig. 53).

Fig. 53. A third representation of the initiation into the mysteries

A text of the fourth century A.D. explains clearly the function of the sword in these representations. The author observes that the followers of Mithras 'are not even ashamed to be blindfolded', and continues indignantly: 'with some their hands are tied together with chicken guts and then they are thrown across pits full of water. Someone approaches with a sword, cuts through the guts and as a result of this act calls himself liberator (*alii autem ligatis manibus intestinis pullinis projiciuntur super foveas aqua plenas, accedente quodam cum gladio et inrumpente intestina supra dicta qui se liberatorem appellet*)'.

Besides the representations at Capua, there is further evidence regarding the trials of initiation. Suidas, who composed a lexicon in the ninth century A.D., writes under the word 'Mithras', nobody could be initiated into them [the

Mithraic mysteries], if, after having undergone a certain number of ordeals, he did not show himself to be sanctified (ὅσιος) and so impervious'. There are dreadful tales about the emperors Commodus and Julian (see p. 166), and in an oration against Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus (I, 70) reproaches that emperor for admiring τὰς ἐν Μίθρου βασάνους καὶ καύσεις ἐνδίκους τὰς μυστικὰς—'the ordeals in Mithraic ritual and the branding of the initiates'.

A monk by the name of Nonnus, who lived in the sixth or seventh century A.D., writes in great detail about the ordeals mentioned by Gregory, but here we enter the realm of fantasy:

> They who are going to be received into the Mithraic cult, are initiated by undergoing a series of trials, first they are subjected to light tests and then to the more severe ones. For example they first of all leave the initiate to fast for fifty days, and when after this they are given harsher treatment, they are 'chafed' for two days and then left in snow (or cold water) for twenty days. After thus having intensified the ordeal from small to great, only they are initiated in the deeper mysteries, the novice having given proof of his ability to withstand these ordeals.

In the eighth century A.D. Bishop Cosmas of Jerusalem improved even on these exaggerations. According to him there were eighty tests, which included 'submerging themselves in water for many days, throwing themselves into fires, living in solitude and abstaining from all food'.

After reading all these texts one has the impression that the authors had no very profound knowledge of the true nature of these proceedings. The Swede Edsman has pointed out that in all probability certain followers of Mithras underwent a baptism of fire, but all things considered, one cannot escape the conclusion that the evidence at our disposal must be interpreted with caution. It has

been suggested that the layout of a small stone feature which was noted in the Mithraeum of Carrawburgh may be connected with this baptism. In 1949 the excavators found an oblong trench strongly resembling a tomb close to a hearth on the south side of the sanctuary. If this trench were covered with stone slabs a man, laid inside it, could be subjected to alternating ordeals by heat and sudden cold. Beside this trench there was a small seat. This arrangement recalls the first side chapel of the Santa Prisca sanctuary (see p. 41), but there the explanation depends entirely on the graffito on the rim of the vessel buried near a wider but similar trench in which a person could be laid outstretched. At Carrawburgh a fire-shovel was found in the same room, and it is therefore not impossible that this room was used for the ceremony of the branding. The fire-shovel is incidentally an attribute of the Lion, itself the symbol of fire. An alternative reading is that this room was used to enact death and resurrection and in this connection we are reminded of the figure lying face downwards in the painting at Capua and the suspect text of Lampridius concerning the Emperor Commodus: 'he defiled the mysteries of Mithras with murder since it was customary there for something to be spoken or imitated to produce a kind of fear (*sacra Mithraica homicidio vero polluit, cum illic aliquid ad speciem timoris vel dici vel fingi soleat*)'.

In the pit at Carrawburgh several bones of sheep or goats were found, which remind us of the somewhat doubtful Mithraeum 'delle tre navate' at Ostia, where a tomb-like construction was found in the central passage, while near by a pig was portrayed in the floor mosaic. These discoveries do not furnish sufficiently conclusive evidence, nor are the texts particularly reliable, with the

result that we can do no more than peruse the material at our disposal for hints and suggestions.

At a given moment, after the novice had been submitted to certain purification rites and had gone through a time of fasting and abstinence, he reached the end of his ordeals. He had sworn the oath, been branded on hands or forehead and had pressed the Father's right hand (*iunctio dextrarum*). The joining of the right hands (δεξίωσις) promoted the initiates to συνδέξιοι with the Father; the oath (*sacramentum*) made them *sacrati* or *consacranei*. An important inscription, discovered in Rome on the Campus Martius near the Cancelleria, the Papal Chancery, is here relevant. This sanctuary, its walls painted with stars and crescent moons, was in use in the middle of the third century A.D. It was founded by the *pater sacrorum*, Proficentius, who commemorates this fact in his own verses:

Hic locus est felix, sanctus piusque benignus
Quem monuit Mithras mentemque dedit
Proficentio, patri sacrorum–(here a palm branch is shown)
Utque sibi spelaeum faceret dedicaretque,
Et celeri instansque operi reddit munera grata.
Quem bono auspicio suscepit anxia mente,
Ut possint syndexi hilares celebrare vota per aevum
Hos versiculos generavit Proficentius,
Pater dignissimus Mithrae–(here a second palm branch is shown).

This place is fortunate, sacred, devout and propitious
It was recommended by Mithras who gave inspiration
To Proficentius, the Father of the mysteries,
To make for himself a cave and to dedicate it;
Insisting on rapid work, he fulfilled a pleasant task,
Which he undertook under good auspices and with a careful mind
That the *syndexi* might celebrate their vows with joy for eternity.

These verses were written by Proficentius
Worthy Father of Mithras.

The two palm-fronds on the inscription may be compared with the sun-wheel and palm-frond, symbols of *Sol invictus*, the invincible Sun-god, on the dedication by a Father in the San Clemente Mithraeum. It would be interesting to know if Proficentius is the subject of the sentence *reddit munera grata*, in which case, having been instructed by Mithras in a dream to build this cave (cf. *ex visu*), he has proceeded to acquit himself of this pleasant task; or if the subject is Mithras himself, in which case the god is rewarding Proficentius out of gratitude.

Most important, however, is the seventh line of the verse. The *syndexi* are the fellow initiates. The word is frequently encountered in the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos, and was thus used in the East as well as in the West. We come across it again in a formula handed down by the apologist Firmicus Maternus in the middle of the fourth century A.D.: "*Μύστα βοοκλοπίης συνδέξιε πατρὸς ἀγαυοῦ.*" 'Novice of the bull-theft, initiate of the proud Father.' The bull was, of course, stolen by Mithras. As a sign of his pact with the Sun-god, Mithras gives his right hand to his companion, and the initiate is the imitator of Mithras who, by giving his right hand in accordance with Persian custom (Diodorus, XVI, 43), concludes the pact and confirms the oath. The Cancelleria inscription mentions that the 'initiates with the right hand' joyfully celebrate their vows. These vows are not only valid for the period of life on earth, but also for all eternity.

14

The Seven Grades of Initiation

We come now to the question of the initiate's chances of promotion within the seven grades; we do not know whether he remained simply a member of the fraternity throughout his life or whether he could in time rise to higher office. The average follower of Mithras almost certainly did not advance to a higher grade, either because he did not manifest a sufficient sense of dedication to his god, or because he lacked the necessary education, or sometimes perhaps because he lacked the necessary funds, to be able to climb the symbolic seven steps of the ladder which led ultimately to the select grade of Father of Fathers. But he who accumulated sufficient theological knowledge and acquired an insight into the astronomical and astrological theories of the Mithraic cult—in short he who fulfilled certain requirements—could gain successively the titles of Raven (*Corax*), Bride (*Nymphus*), Soldier (*Miles*), Lion (*Leo*), Persian (*Perses*), Courier of the Sun (*Heliodromus*) and Father (*Pater*). Numerous inscriptions and discoveries in both East and West confirm this information as recorded by the Church Father Hieronymus (fourth and fifth centuries A.D.), and show that the sequence of the seven grades was the same throughout the whole extent of the Roman Empire.

The Greek language plays a dominant part in the names of the seven grades as well as in the ritual language, and the name Persian is a reminder of the cult's foreign origin. The names Raven and Lion go back to customs of a much earlier period; parallels are found throughout antiquity and also among present-day primitive tribes. The posses-

sors of these grades dressed the part and were often portrayed as such, though not in the lively manner described by Pseudo-Augustine who says that 'some flap their wings like birds and imitate the crowing of a raven, whilst others roar like lions'. Two inscriptions from Rome, the first dated A.D. 358 the second A.D. 362, record one additional title, that of *Cryfius* or *Chryfius*. Both these inscriptions mention that 'as *Patres*' Nonius Victor Olympius and Aurelius Victor Augentius initiated several members of the community into special grades. These Fathers *ostenderunt cryfios* and *tradiderunt chryfios*. These two texts from Rome are so far unique and have given rise to considerable speculation about the *Cryfii*; many interpretations have been offered varying from the suggestion that they refer to a grade called 'Vulture' (γρύψ, compare hyena) to a supposed origin in the word 'hidden' (κρυφίος, Latin *nymphus*). The first explanation is grammatically impossible, but the second has in its favour the evidence of a painting at Santa Prisca where the *Nymphus* is seen wearing a bridal veil (see p. 142) during the mystical marriage with Mithras.

In a recent article Professor C. W. Vollgraff has thrown new light on this question by making a firm distinction between the *Nymphi* and the *Chryfii*. The *Nymphi* are the Brides of Mithras, the *Chryfii* are the Hidden Ones, not 'secret members' of the community, but youths who, like the Spartan κρυπτοί, have not yet been received as official members into the clan or cult; the 'hidden ones' who have not appeared in the full light of the public eye. They are the ἐλπίδες who embody the future aspirations of the community (as noted at Dura-Europos). In a solemn ceremony the Fathers of the community introduce the 'hope of the future' to Mithras (*ostenderunt* or *tradiderunt*). Inscriptions

from the same period prove that these *Chryfii* were sometimes of extreme youth, even small children being initiated in the mysteries.

Porphyry (third century A.D.) tells us that the three lowest grades were 'attendants' (ὑπηρετοῦντες) while the higher grades were the true 'participants', and that clearly these 'participants' were meant to take a full part in the sacred meal, while the lower grades acted merely as servants. But the archaeological evidence does not bear this out. On an altar from Pettau in Yugoslavia (Fig. 33) Mithras and Sol are seen standing on either side of an altar (compare p. 97). They are holding up a spit with small pieces of meat skewered on to it, at which the raven is about to peck. Since the raven is imitated by the *Corax* in the mysteries, he must as such participate in the meal. On a painting at Dura-Europos the raven offers a spit with small pieces of meat to Sol and Mithras, who are in this case both present at the meal; here the Raven is the true attendant as portrayed on the Konjica relief (Fig. 36) and on the paintings of the sacred meal on the left wall of the Santa Prisca Mithraeum. Thus we may conclude that the Raven is pre-eminently the attendant but that he can also be a 'participant'. The reverse holds for true 'participants'. In the paintings at Santa Prisca on the under as well as the upper layer Lions are almost exclusively depicted, walking in procession, bearing gifts to Mithras and therefore acting as 'attendants'. This concept is borne out by an inscription from a sanctuary at the foot of the Aventine dedicated ἱερεὺς καὶ πατὴρ Βενοῦστος σύν τοῖς ὑπηρέταις θεοῦ ('by the priest and Father Venustus together with the attendants of the god'); the attendants include Lions, as is proved by a second inscription from the same sanctuary. This procedure is paralleled in the Roman

Catholic church where a priest sometimes performs the function of deacon or subdeacon, just as everyone baptised from the age of seven onward is termed *μετέχων*.

We have been able to gain a deeper insight into the Mithraic cult from recent discoveries, particularly at Ostia and Santa Prisca, which have yielded most valuable material. At Ostia the heraldic emblems of all the grades are picked out in mosaic and at Santa Prisca the grade-bearers are portrayed with their attributes. We have to consider this documentation together with the scanty literary evidence at our disposal.

Fig. 54. Symbols of the Raven

(i) CORAX, THE RAVEN

In the legend of the bull-slaying the Raven has the rôle of the messenger who comes to entrust Mithras with his mission. He takes the place, as it were, of Mercury, the messenger of the gods, and bears as his emblem the *caduceus*, the magic staff of Hermes-Mercury. On the Ostia mosaic a cup has been added, and although in the Santa Prisca version the Raven in the procession of the seven grades has unfortunately been lost, beside its place can still be read the words: *Nama Coracibus tutela Mercurii*, 'Hail to the Ravens under the protection of Mercury'. The Raven symbolises the air and at the initiation he must

have undergone certain rituals relating to this element, rituals which are called *corvina* or *coracina sacra* and which qualify the initiate as a ἱερός κόραξ or 'divine Raven'. We sometimes find this adjective *sanctus* used in connection with other grades too, but particularly with the *Pater*, the Father or head of the community. When attending a service, the Raven wears a raven mask (Fig. 36).

Fig. 55. Symbols of the Bride

(ii) NYMPHUS, THE BRIDE

On the Santa Prisca mural the *Nymphus* is shown wearing a bridal veil and, according to the *dipinto* (painted inscription) above the figure, he is placed under the protection of the planet Venus. It is therefore somewhat difficult to know whether in the Mithraeum 'delle pareti dipinte' at Ostia the painted figure holding a mirror represents Aphrodite or the *Nymphus* himself. In one Mithraeum at Dura-Europos there are as many as sixteen *Nymphi*. This male bride (women, we know, were rigorously excluded from the cult) is joined to Mithras in a mystical marriage by the Father, but evidently such a symbolic marriage with the god does not necessarily preclude a civil marriage.

At the initiation the δεξίωσις or *iunctio dextrarum*, the clasping of the right hand as a pledge of fidelity and

alliance, plays an important part (see p. 97). This gesture was used by the Persians as well as the Romans and is often portrayed on Roman sarcophagi.

A text of Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.*, XIX, is worth noting: ‹Aἶ›δε νύμφε, χαῖρε νύμφε, χαῖρε νέον φῶς.

Unfortunately the first word is disputed. If we read it as αἶδε, then the text would mean 'Sing, *Nymphus*', but if we decipher it, as some editors have done, as ἰδέ then it would be 'Behold, *Nymphus*, hail *Nymphus*, hail new light'. The second explanation fits in with the *velum*, the veil or the *flammeum* of the Roman marriage ceremony as worn by the bride, for the veil was probably pulled away at a given moment in the Mithraic ritual and the Bride shown to the community. According to Apuleius a similar rite was performed in the cult of Isis: *repente velis reductis, in aspectum populi errabat.* But the first explanation of αἶδε, 'Sing', may be correct, and the *Nymphus* may have been required to sing a special marriage hymn.

The damaged mosaic at Ostia shows as emblems of the *Nymphus* a torch, a diadem and a lamp. The torch is the wedding torch, and the diadem is a clear allusion to Venus. The lamp is a symbol of the νέον φῶς, the new light which flows from a new and closer relationship with the Sun-god Mithras. It is probable that immediately after the initiation of the *Nymphus*, the Mithraeum was flooded with a powerful light. I presume (though proof is impossible) that because of the special purification rites which must have preceded the ceremony (compare the painting in the Vatican called the 'Nozze Aldobrandini'), the *Nymphus* represented the element of water.

Fig. 56. Symbols of the Soldier

(iii) MILES, THE SOLDIER

The god Mithras is always regarded as *deus invictus*, an invincible god, who as the Avesta records (see p. 16) secures victory for his followers on the battlefield. In the struggle for the ultimate triumph of good over evil, Mithras is the associate of the god of good. Strictly speaking, every follower of the god was enrolled in his service (*militia*), but the special initiation and the taking of the military oath set the seal on entrance into his ranks. The initiate took a very literal view of this; in Santa Prisca the Soldier is represented dressed in brown with a soldier's kitbag slung over his left shoulder and on the mosaic at Ostia this bag is his emblem together with lance and helmet, as he is under the particular patronage of Mars, the god of war. Some inscriptions call him *pius* or ἐυσεβής or even *integer*, that is to say god-fearing, devout or pure.

Just as *Corax* and *Nymphus* represent the elements of light and water, so the Soldier could be regarded as symbolising the earth, and the Lion the element of fire.

But there is no definite justification for this theory, since there is no evidence that the Soldier underwent baptism through the element of earth. For a description of his initiation Tertullian's vague account in *De praescr.*, 40: must suffice, (*Mithras*) *signet illic in frontibus milites suos*, 'Mithras makes a sign on his soldiers' forehead'. The branding of the initiate applied therefore particularly to the attainment of the grade of Soldier unless Tertullian used *milites* to cover all initiates of whatever grade. Elsewhere Tertullian (*De Corona*, 15) describes the initiation of the Soldier:

> When he is being initiated in the cave, truly a camp of darkness, a wreath offered to him on the point of his sword and then placed on his head must be pushed off the head with the flat of his hand, and then laid on his shoulder with the words that Mithras alone is his wreath. And after that he is never garlanded again and this sign he possesses as evidence when he is tested with the military oath, and immediately, he is recognised as a soldier of Mithras when he has thrown off the wreath and said that it rests in his god.

Just as an ordinary soldier might be awarded a wreath for saving the life of an ordinary citizen or for being the first to storm an enemy fortress, so the Soldier of Mithras gained this distinction at his initiation. The offering of the wreath on the point of a sword was a final test of the initiate's courage. Tertullian calls this 'a mimicry of martyrdom'. One wonders if the object, lying at the feet of the initiate in a painting from Capua (Fig. 52), could be the sword mentioned by Tertullian. In any case, the Soldier of Mithras rejects the wreath with great humility saying 'Mithras alone is my wreath; my wreath rests in my god'. Like Mithras before him, he has taken the burden on his shoulders and in future he will fight against enemy forces

under strict discipline. On a painting in Santa Prisca the Soldier is bearing the train of the initiate who precedes him.

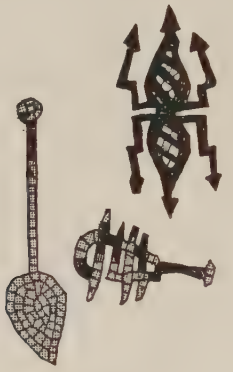

Fig. 57. Symbols of the Lion

(iv) LEO, THE LION

The Lion wore a long scarlet cloak and was always *aridae et ardentis naturae* (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.*, I, 13), 'of an arid and fiery nature'. His symbol was a fire-shovel, and I am therefore inclined to regard the figure with the shovel on the floor mosaic of the Mithraeum 'degli animali' near the sanctuary of Cybele at Ostia as a Lion. During the excavations of the Mithraea at Heddernheim and Carrawburgh actual fire-shovels were found, and in the Mithraeum Felicissimus at Ostia a fire-shovel is portrayed in mosaic as the Lion's emblem, together with a *sistrum* (the sacred rattle, adopted from the Isis cult) and the thunderbolts of Jupiter (since the Lion is placed under the special protection of the planet Jupiter).

There are some specific references to the fire symbol at the initiation. Porphyry, (*De Antro Nympharum*, 15) records:

When those who are being initiated as Lions have honey instead of water poured over their hands to cleanse them, then are the hands kept pure of all evil, all crime and contamination, as becomes an initiate. Since fire is purifying, the fitting ablution is administered to them, rejecting water as being hostile to fire. And they also cleanse his tongue of sin with honey.

Fig. 58. Lion above a mixing vessel; Cautes

In connection with this particular piece of symbolism we often find the Lion portrayed on Mithraic reliefs in a threatening attitude beside or over a mixing-vessel, as on the relief from Sarmizegetusa (Fig. 58), while in an inscription from Steklen in Bulgaria a Lion even bears the name Melichrisus, the 'honey-anointed'. The Lion has entered into such a special relation with Mithras that he accompanies the god on the hunt like the snake and the dog. In the Mithraeum of Santa Prisca we know of two

processions of Lions, all bearing offerings (see p. 50), and on the relief from Konjic in Yugoslavia (Fig. 36) one such initiate is wearing the lion mask.

The Lion occupies a special place in the Mithraic mysteries, and in the procession of the seven grades at Santa Prisca the *Miles* pays him special homage. This particular Lion, with his scarlet train, coal-black eyes and proud dignified bearing, has been immortalised in a truly unforgettable manner by the painter of Santa Prisca. The Lion probably underwent a baptism of fire in connection with the symbolism attached to his rôle. An inscription at Dura-Europos records the same word *νίπτρον* that occurs in a text of Porphyry: *πυρωτὸν ἄσθμα τὸ καὶ μάγοις ἦ νίπτρον ὁσίω‹ν›*, 'fiery breath which for the Magi must also be a bath of those sanctified'. It is notable that the term *ἄσθμα* is used again by Dio Chrysostom in his account of the setting on fire of the three horses by the fiery breath of the outside horse in the quadriga of Phaëthon (see p. 171). Can we discern in the rite of the baptism of fire an allusion to this future conflagration? The stream of fire which will spread over the earth at the end of time will strike down evil-doers only; the righteous will be spared and for them this experience will be only a *νίπτρον* or bath. Two lines of verse from the bottom layer of paintings at Santa Prisca indicate this relation between the Lion, Mithras and the cosmic conflagration. Here the faithful ask that the 'incense-burning Lions' should be received by the Father, in this case meaning Mithras. 'The Lions, through whom we ourselves offer the incense, through whom we ourselves are consumed (*consumimur*)'. The purifying force of fire used in the mysteries of the cult transforms the Lion into a new man, into one who is sanctified, who like Jupiter himself strikes down the Titans with lightning and who

with Mithras joins in hunting down the powers of evil. The Lions are united with Mithras and the Sun through fire, and thus also with the chariot of the sun. Purified by fire, they will ultimately become immune from its consuming power. A relief from Rome showing the fiery breath issuing from the Time-god's lion mouth is clearly connected with this belief, and on a statue of Aion at Sidon (Africa) the lion's head has been hollowed out at the back in order that fire could be placed there at certain ceremonies. In some Mithraea statues of Lions were erected which remind us vividly of statues placed as grave guardians.

The Lion stands in a particular relation not only to the god, but possibly also to the moon. This second connection is, however, more the province of the grade *Perses*.

Fig. 59. Symbols of the Persian

(v) PERSES, THE PERSIAN

In the paintings at Santa Prisca the Persian is dressed in a grey tunic and placed under the particular protection of the moon. Like the Lion his hands are cleansed with honey during the ceremony when the grade of *Persica* is conferred upon him, but according to Porphyry there is a

difference between the two; 'when they administer honey to the Persian they do this in his capacity as keeper of the fruits (ὡς φύλακι καρπῶν), in this symbol they express the preserving element'. Honey is the sugar of antiquity and Herodotus (1, 198) stresses its preservative quality. According to the ideas of the ancient Persians honey comes from the moon, where the semen of the bull slain by Mithras was also taken and purified, henceforth to produce new fruits and plants. Thus the moon is the temporary guardian of the fruits, and the Persian personifies the moon. On the other hand he also has a particular position in relation to Mithras. His symbols are the *falx* (sickle)

Fig. 60. Mithras cutting corn

and the scythe and on the paintings at Santa Prisca he carries some long twigs (possibly ears of corn), but the sickle is also Saturn's emblem and on a relief at Dieburg Mithras is portrayed as the divine reaper (Fig. 60); he gathers the harvest, which springs from the spinal fluid

and blood of the bull. In this respect the Persian is a faithful follower of his god.

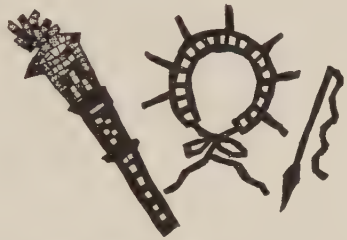

Fig. 61. Symbols of the Courier of the Sun

(vi) HELIODROMUS, THE COURIER OF THE SUN

The name Courier of the Sun indicates at once that this grade is the deputy on earth of Helios-Sol under whose care he is placed. At Ostia his emblems are a whip, a radiate halo and a torch, at Santa Prisca a globe, a nimbus and a radiate halo. The figure in oriental costume with a globe in his left hand, portrayed in a niche of the Mithraic sanctuary in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, is probably also intended to represent a *Heliodromus*. He is the sun, daily traversing the heavens in his chariot and urging on the horses with his whip. Once, through the agency of the Raven, he communicated to Mithras the order for the bull-slaying; once he concluded a pact with Mithras; from Mithras he received the accolade; with Mithras he enjoyed the sacred meal before ascending into heaven. It is probable that all these events were imitated during certain ceremonies in the Mithraeum. In this connection we are completely certain of only one event, the clearest proof of which is given in the Santa Prisca sanctuary. On

the right-hand wall the *Heliodromus* is portrayed as a member of the mystic community. He wears a red garment with a yellow belt and with his left hand he clasps to himself a blue globe, while his right hand is raised in greeting towards the Father of the community, who is seated on his throne and wears a red robe and a red pointed cap. On the left-hand wall the two gods Sol and Mithras are seen partaking of the sacred meal, at which the divine Sun-god wears the same garments and has the same attributes as his earthly representative, the *Heliodromus*. A perhaps less imposing representation of the *Heliodromus* is to be found on the right-hand side wall of the Mithraeum 'delle pareti dipinte' at Ostia. He holds in his left hand a long, thin stick and a blue nimbus is painted round his head. He is approaching a tree with leafy branches near which stands a nude figure with a small cape hanging loosely about his shoulders. He is probably beating the fruit down from the tree with the stick—in which case he might also be interpreted as a Persian.

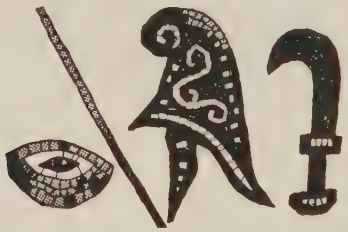

Fig. 62. Symbols of the Father

(vii) PATER, THE FATHER

This, the highest of the grades in the Mithraic cult, is the deputy on earth of the god himself and is therefore

portrayed clothed like Mithras. He is a Father to his initiates, who call themselves *fratres*, brothers, and guards over the interests of his community (*defensor*). He is also the *magister sacrorum*, the teacher whose wisdom is symbolised by a ring and a staff (ῥάβδος). He is the Magus, the σοφιστής, the high-priest (*summus pontifex*) who has been chosen by his fellow-initiates (*consacranei syndexi*) as the lawful Father (*pater nominus*—πατὴρ νόμιμος τῶν τελετῶν τοῦ θεοῦ) at the mysteries and as such he carries the responsibility for dispensing initiation to the different grades and for accepting new members. At Dura-Europos we encounter an ἀντίπατρος, possibly a preliminary grade to that of Father, while in Rome there are the *pater sacrorum*, the Father of the mysteries, and the *pater patrum*. This Father of Fathers is the great shepherd, for an inscription records a 'Father of the Fathers from amongst the ten superiors' (*de decem primis pater patrum*). He is the representative of the *pietas*, and hence *pius*, *pientissimus* or *sanctus*, and he is supremely worthy (*dignissimus*). He has also studied astrology (*studiosus astrologiae*) and no wonder, for the whole of the Mithraic mysteries is steeped in astrological concepts from which stem the doctrine of the seven grades, which as we have seen were placed under the protection of the seven planets, the *Pater* standing under the guardianship of Saturn. Above him at Santa Prisca are these words: 'Hail all Fathers from East to West, under the protection of Saturn'. At Ostia his symbols are the sickle of Saturn, the Phrygian cap of Mithras and the staff and ring which represent his wisdom.

15

Constellations and the Elements

In the earliest hymns of the Avesta, the 'Gathas', which contain the teachings of Zarathustra pure and unadorned, there are no allusions to astrology. But in the later parts we find the Amesha-Spentas, attendant powers of Ahura-Mazda, possibly identified with the seven planets. It was the influence of the Chaldean priests which introduced this concept of the constellations. This doctrine penetrated into the Hellenistic world by so many channels that it is not surprising to find traces of it in the Mithraic cult.

Astronomy was studied in the most highly educated circles of the Roman Empire, but astrology, 'the illegitimate sister' as Professor Cumont has termed it, held by far the greater part of the population in its fatalistic grip. Two inscriptions from Rome erected by prominent Mithraists are a telling proof of the influence of astrology on the cult. The first dates from about A.D. 382 and was found in the Piazza S. Silvestro where Aurelian built his great temple to the sun. It was divided into seven niches, four of them square and three semicircular. The inscription reads:

> Olim Victor avus, caelo devotus et astris,
> Regali sumptu Phoebeia templa locavit.
> Hunc superat pietate nepos, cui nomen avitum est:
> Antra fecit, sumptusque tuos nec Roma requirit,
> Damna piis meliora lucro: quis ditior illo est
> Qui cum caelicolis parcus bona dividit heres.

Once aged Victor dedicated to the heavens and the stars,
With the lavishness of the king, built a temple to Phoebus.
His grandson who bears his grandfather's name excels him in piety:
He has made a grotto, but Rome does not enquire after your expenses.
For personal loss, incurred for a good purpose, is counted an advantage to the pious:
Who then is richer than this thrifty heir,
Who shares his goods with those who dwell in heaven?

This monument was erected by Tamesius Augentius who refurnished the Mithraic cave at his own expense. From the year A.D. 382, in accordance with a decree of the Emperor Gratian, no support had been given towards the building or the upkeep of the monuments of the state cult (see p. 189); hence Augentius's protest: 'But Rome does not enquire after your expenses.' He also mentions his grandfather Victor, who is Nonius Victor Olympius, known to us from various dedications to Mithras between A.D. 357 and 362. He was a Father of Fathers and many were initiated into different grades under his guidance. In the inscription he is described as founder of a Mithraeum and 'a devotee of the heavens and the stars'.

We have a second inscription, of the year A.D. 377, by Rufius Caeionius, who held many priestly offices. He was high priest (*pontifex*) of the state and a priest in the Mithraic cult. In his position as priest officiating for the state he lived in the *Regia* on the Forum Romanum, quite close to the temple of Vesta.

Antiqua generose domo, cui regia Vestae
Pontifici felix sacrato militat igne,
Idem augur, triplicis cultor venerande Dianae,
Persidicique Mithrae antistes Babilonie templi,
Tauribolique simul magni dux mistice sacri.

Of noble and ancient ancestry, priest of the State,
For whom the fortunate Regia, together with Vesta's sacred fire, performs service,
Also augur and venerable worshipper of triple-formed Diana,
And Babylonian priest of Mithras's Persian temple,
Mystic leader of the great mystery of the taurobolium.

It is most remarkable that at the end of the fourth century A.D., when the Mithraic cult was already in decline, Rufius still adhered to the Babylonian traditions. We have already seen how these regions in particular left their mark on the Mithraic cult through the medium of the Magi, and how Nicomedeus referred to the Euphrates on a relief from the neighbourhood of Constanza (see p. 181).

In an inscription scratched on the side wall of the cult niche in the Mithraeum at Santa Prisca, someone has recorded that he was initiated 'at first light on November 20th, the day of Saturn'. This *graffito* is drawn in the form of a horoscope (see p. 44).

The sun and the moon are particularly associated with the miracle of the bull-slaying, but they play an equally important part in the order of the seven planets. On the edge of a relief at Bologna, the seven planets are portrayed round Jupiter, who carries a small basket (*modius*) on his head and is therefore identified with Sarapis. Similarly, on an inscription discovered in the Baths at Caracalla at Rome, Zeus is united in one name with Helios and Sarapis. On the Bologna relief the seven planets are portrayed in the sequence of the days of the week. This is also the case on the lower edge of a splendid bronze plaque which has recently been discovered at Brigetio in Hungary (see plate opposite p. 129). But there is one small difference; while at Bologna the week opens with Sunday, at

Brigetio Saturn has the most prominent place. However, when the planets act as the protectors of the seven grades of the Mithraic cult, then the sequence is: Saturn, Sol, Luna, Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Mercury, which could be taken to indicate that it was only at a later date that the planets were directly related to specific grades.

According to Celsus, whose opinion has been handed down by his opponent Origen, each planet is connected with a metal, for instance the sun with gold, and together they form as it were a symbolical ladder of seven gates. In addition there is an eighth gateway, representing the sphere within which the planets are contained. In the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres at Ostia, seven gates are depicted in mosaic on the central floor; they are constructed of semicircles and fill the whole of the central aisle. On the front of the reclining benches we see the planets and on the borders of the *podia* the signs of the zodiac. The Mithraeum of Felicissimus portrays the symbols of the seven grades in mosaic on seven contiguous panels in the floor of the central aisle; a vase surrounded by twigs is depicted on an eight panel. This sequence is identical with the one at Santa Prisca. The Mithraeum of the Seven Gateways at Ostia is particularly interesting in connection with the theory of Celsus. Immediately behind the entrance to the sanctuary, in black and white mosaic on the central floor, there is a large gateway with pinnacles, flanked on either side by three smaller gates (Fig. 63). Once again the seven planets are represented. In all these examples, then, we have a progression of gateways through which the soul descended at birth and through which it returned after death. On its journeys it received or relinquished some attribute from each of the planets.

The number seven played a dominant rôle in the

Mithraic cult and we sometimes find, on reliefs from the Danube region, seven cypresses (sun-trees) alternating with seven daggers, on each of which hangs a Phrygian

Fig. 63. Mosaic of seven gates at Ostia

cap. The cult niche at Dura-Europos is reached by ascending seven steps (see plate opposite p. 128). A crudely sculptured relief, now preserved at Mannheim, shows a row of seven small altars (Fig. 64) and an enormous snake turning its head towards a large vessel in the foreground. Beside this vessel is a small altar in front of which stands a priest of Mithras, possibly a Father, offering a libation in a *krater*. The dog, faithful companion of Mithras, is stitting by his side. There is another example on the floor mosaic of the sanctuary of the Seven Gateways at Ostia, where a vessel is portrayed with the snake, which appears on this occasion from the rock; on the other side a raven or eagle is perching on a thunderbolt. Quite often we see a fierce-looking lion beside the vessel and snake (Figs. 10 and 58). A vase, snake, lion, bird and thunderbolt all appear on a relief at Trier showing the birth of Mithras, and on a *terra sigillata* bowl a

lion, a vase with a serpent, a raven and a cock are included in a representation of the sacred meal. This combination of symbols is probably a portrayal of the four elements:

Fig. 64. Priest of Mithras in front of an altar

water (vessel), fire (lion), earth (snake) and air (bird). We know that, as long ago as the time of the Persian Magi, the four elements were held in profound reverence, and that great care was always taken not to pollute them (see p. 20 and Fig. 1). The elements played an important part in the Mithraic cult too, and there may even have been a ceremony of passing through the seven gates of the planets.

Originally the whole of the world's life span was divided astrologically into seven long periods, in each of which a different planet predominated. This scheme was subsequently changed into a twelvefold division following the signs of the zodiac, which is encountered in various representations of Mithras. Sometimes, like the planets, the signs of the Zodiac are depicted on the border of the vault where the bull-slaying takes place, as for example in London. Sometimes, as at Trier, they are found in a large circle often supported by Mithras, and in such cases we

have a representation of Mithras's birth from the rock. Elsewhere, as at Modena, the circle surrounds the portrayal of Mithras as Time-god (see plate opposite p. 160). In the centre side chapel of the sanctuary at Santa Prisca, the niche is decorated with a large ring painted blue in which the signs of the zodiac are picked out in stucco. The course of the sun through the signs of the zodiac is also to be found in representations of the Time-god (see p. 120) and here, as with the planets, the same sequence is always maintained.

A rather obscure allusion to the stars is found at Apulum (Alba-Julia) in Rumania on the upper part of a relief which was dedicated to Mithras by a veteran of the Thirteenth Legion. There is a representation of the bull in a boat and, in front, the bull in a house on a reduced scale. On the ground are two rams and a goat which is jumping up towards one of Mithras's two companions, while the other, similarly dressed in oriental attire, stands in front of a couch where Saturn or Jupiter is lying (Fig. 65).

Fig. 65. Relief of Mithras with Saturn or Jupiter on a couch

On a magnificent marble relief from Sidon (Saida) in Syria the four seasons are also related to the signs of the

Mithras as Time-god; relief from Modena

Mithras as Time-god; statue at Merida, Spain

zodiac. The seasons are portrayed as children: Winter is wearing a cap and has a duck as attribute; Autumn is wearing a wreath and has a basket of fruit; Spring is shown with a basket full of flowers and Summer, who wears a garland of corn-ears, with a sheaf of corn. Again, on the bronze plaque from Brigetio, the seasons are personified in medallions in the four corners: Spring is shown as a youth, Summer as a woman, Autumn as a man and Winter as a clothed woman. The stars are shown as well as the planets, and below the bull-slaying there is a group which includes the lion, serpent and vase (compare Fig. 10).

In the four corners of many reliefs the Wind-gods have been added to the picture of the bull-slaying or of Mithras's birth: usually they are depicted with wings sprouting from their hair while they blow the wind in front of them with puffed-out cheeks. On a large altar in Mithraeum III at Carnuntum (see p. 60) the Wind-gods and the seasons are represented together. The bearded Caelus, god of the heavens, appears on the front and by his side are Spring and Summer, represented as two young men carrying garlands of flowers or corn-ears. The right-hand side of the altar shows Winter personified by an old man with a beard, dressed in a long cloak which is pulled over his head. Beside Winter kneels a youthful Wind-god, naked and with small wings on his head. He is blowing a horn and is the cold Auster. Similarly on the left-hand side Autumn (*Autumnus*), who is wearing bunches of grapes in his hair, is shown with the favourable wind Favonius. The other two Wind-gods, Eurus and Septentrio, appear on the back of the altar.

Herodotus (I, 131) records that in the fifth century B.C. the Persians brought offerings 'to the sun, moon, earth,

fire, water and the winds'. This report is later confirmed by Strabo and the practice continued to be observed in the Mithraic cult. The concept of the soul's journey through the separate spheres of the planets led the followers of Mithras to believe that the Wind-gods could help or hinder this journey, a belief which explains why they are sometimes blowing upwards and sometimes downwards.

16

Women and the Mithraic Cult

One of the problems that arises out of our study of Mithraism is the place of women in the cult. It may seem strange to our modern Western minds, accustomed as we are to the idea of equal rights for men and women, that we should need to raise the question whether women could be initiated into this Persian cult. We are inclined to consider it iniquitous that a deity should bestow all his favours upon his male followers and ignore women completely. But this exclusiveness is not unique. Although the mysteries of Eleusis, Isis, Cybele and Dionysus were open to both sexes and sometimes even allotted a main part to women, cults such as those of the *Bona Dea* excluded men altogether.

Porphyry, in an obscure passage of his *De Abstinentia*, says that the initiates who took part in the Mithraic mysteries were called lions and the women hyenas. But with this text we are on dangerous ground, because it is apparently corrupt and much altered, and we do not come across any mention of the grade of hyena anywhere else in

spite of the fact that the various discoveries have on the whole told us a great deal about grades.

Even if the word '*hyaina*' is changed into '*leaina*' (lioness) the difficulty is by no means removed. This grade is not mentioned in any regular list of the grades, and only one single instance occurs, and that in very special circumstances. In a small town called Guigariche, five miles west of Tripoli, two sepulchral chambers were found side by side, carved out of the rock. The rooms contain fine paintings and are furnished with a niche which housed the burial itself. The inscriptions tell us that a man and his wife named Aelius Magnus and Aelia Arisuth were buried here, and the cover of the sarcophagus records that the one lies here as *leo*, the other as *lea* (lioness), a point which is emphasised by a painting of a lion and lioness. Is this the grave of a follower of Mithras of the Lion grade?

No further traces have survived of the cult at Guigariche (ancient Oea) and the graves themselves offer no definite answer. The only indication we have is the presence of a striding figure holding a candle, painted beside the niche containing the tomb of the man. This same figure also appears in the procession of the Lions in Santa Prisca (see p. 50). If we assume that Aelius Magnus represented a Lion of Mithras, then we can safely conclude that his wife occupied the grade of Lioness. If such were the case, then we must consider this a unique example, and the possible Mithraic community of Oea would be the only one in the West where women were admitted in the various grades; all our other sources speak only of men, and where a woman's name is mentioned in an inscription she never bears a title. We get the impression that the Mithraic cult's preference for men reflected the old conception of a kind of 'clan', where

secrets were divulged exclusively to the male who, as head of the household, represented his family. Such were the *viri sacrati*, the initiates whose high priests were, according to Tertullian (*De praescr. haer.* 40), only allowed to marry once. All this is reminiscent of the strictly prescribed castes of the Magi and the advice specially given in the Avesta to the 'master of the house':

> If the head of the house who presides over the house, or the head of the clan who presides over the clan, or the head of the tribe who presides over the tribe, or the head of the country who presides over the country, are false to him, Mithra enraged and provoked comes forth to smash the house, the clan, the tribe, the country, the heads of the houses who preside over the houses . . . . (Yasht x, 18).

Tertullian (*ibid.*) is again relevant, for this passage suggests that the Mithraic cult also had '*virgines et continentes*', men and women who habitually denied themselves the act of love in honour of the god. Thus the woman could also dedicate herself to the god even though she could not be accepted into the mysteries. However, we have only the testimony of Tertullian (end of the second century) on this particular point.

Here Professor Vollgraff raises the further question whether some other grades, such as the Nymphi (see p. 142), who were joined to the god in a mystical marriage, were still free to contract a worldly marriage as well. If they were not, then a few of them, who were not going to proceed to a higher grade, could be *continentes*. I myself believe that we can reach a solution to this question. At Dura-Europos the largest number of initiates are *Nymphi*, but in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum at Rome the majority are Lions, and it would seem unlikely that all the *Nymphi* at Dura were also *continentes*. Moreover, the initiate who

proceeds to a higher rank does not necessarily lose his previous distinctions. Documents relating to a married couple named Kamenius are very illuminating on this very point. Two inscriptions from Rome, both found in the grounds of the Temple of Cybele in the Vatican and one of them dated July 19th, A.D. 374, record dedications by or for Alfenius Ceionius Julianus Kamenius, who occupied among other positions those of *pater*, *magister* and *hierocéryx* in the Mithraic cult. Significantly, although he has achieved the highest grade, he still alludes to his rôle as κήρυξ (herald) which is specially associated with the lowest grade of all, the Raven (κόραξ—see p. 141). We learn that in A.D. 385 Kamenius was appointed Father of Fathers and that when he died at Antium he still held this office. His wife had a poem carved on his tomb which reads:

> Te dulcis coniunx lacrimis noctesque diesque
> Cum parvis deflet natis, solacia vitae
> Amisisse dolens casto viduata cubili.

> Your dear wife weeps for you both day and night
> Together with the little children; grieved that she has lost the comfort of her life,
> Sorrowing for the loss from the chaste marriage-bed.

One wonders why Kamenius should have remained unmarried during the period of 'brotherhood' when he was passing through the grades from Raven to Father. Certainly *continentes* remained single of their own free will, though Tertullian says of the *summus pontifex*, the Father, that Mithras commanded him to enter into marriage once only (*in unius nuptiis statuit*).

17

Human Sacrifice

ACCORDING to Herodotus (VII, 114), the Persians had a custom of burying a man alive as a thank offering to the god of the underworld. Amestris, the wife of Xerxes, is said to have killed twice seven Persian boys of prominent families in this way. It has been argued whether such odious practices—assuming that they actually did take place—prevailed in the Mithraic cult as well. Certain passages from classical literature and a few finds may be cited in support of such a view. Lampridius, in his biography of the Emperor Commodus (A.D. 180-192), relates that the emperor defiled the Mithraic mysteries by a murder (*sacra Mithraica homicidio vero polluit cum illic aliquid ad speciem timoris vel dici vel fingi solebat*).

Two centuries later we find the Church historian Socrates (fourth-fifth century) alleging that the Greeks of Alexandria 'killed men' at the celebrations of the mysteries. A Hungarian scholar, Massalsky, has recently accused the Emperor Julian of the same crime as Commodus. Massalsky has published an article on the inventory of a temple discovered in Hungary, close to the village of Fertörakes on the old high road from Sopron to Petronell. This sanctuary was dedicated to the invincible Sun-god, of whom Julian was an ardent follower, and besides various reliefs and altars it contained a sarcophagus filled with human bones. The author concludes from these discoveries and some fantastic stories, that the young prince, when passing this way on his expedition against his uncle Constantius, offered a human sacrifice of which the bones remain as proof of his horrible deed.

Two brick troughs which look like sarcophagi were discovered at the entrance of the *spelaeum* of San Clemente in Rome. But this find is less revealing than one at Saarburg, where the skeleton of a man between thirty and forty years old was found at the far end of the Mithraeum lying on a large relief of the *tauroctonos* which had been previously destroyed. The skeleton was lying face downwards with its wrists bound behind its back with an iron chain. We may justifiably ask whether we have here a victim of ritual murder. If so, the act would have been committed many centuries after the Emperor Tiberius had officially forbidden the offering of human sacrifices, with special reference to the killing of children in the cult of Saturn in Africa (Tertullian, *Apol.*, 9, 2). The Emperor Hadrian also emphatically condemned sacrifice, as we learn from Pallas, an exponent and follower of the Mithraic cult who strongly emphasised this point, probably in order to counter imputations against the Persian cult (Porphyry, *De Abst.*, II, 56). Finally, the prohibition of human sacrifice became part of the civil code (Paulus, v, 23, 16). In the case of the Emperor Julian it seems most improbable that this head of the state would himself have transgressed laws which, according to Pallas, were entirely consistent with his worship of Sol Invictus.

If we ascribe a basis of truth to the words of Lampridius, we have to find the Emperor Commodus guilty of the outrage, especially as we read in the same text that the Mithraic cult 'was accustomed to make reference to or simulate such a thing [a murder] merely to instil fear'. This practice, which seems to be corroborated by the paintings at Capua (see p. 131), may be a relic of ritual human sacrifice, which may have taken place in the East before being abolished when the cult spread to the West.

We must not forget that the Greeks and the Romans considered human sacrifices to be base and horrible, and that the most effective way of attacking a rival cult was to accuse it of this very crime. In the same way the defenders of paganism did not hesitate to level the same charge against the Christians.

We arrive thus at a much simpler explanation for the sarcophagus in the Mithraeum at Fertörakes, namely that this natural sanctuary offered a favourable burial ground for a number of people from that region during a period when the temple had fallen into disuse. As to the discovery at Saarburg, it seems clear that the skeleton was put there after the violent destruction of this pagan cult place. The victim was probably murdered out of vengeance and the corpse, according to ancient Persian belief, placed in the sanctuary to desecrate it and make it unclean. Such seems to have been the intention of the murderers.

18

Liturgical Hymns

Herodotus, the 'Father of History', has described (1, 132) a Persian sacrifice in which the person making the offering is supposed to pray for benefits not for himself alone but for all Persians. The sacrificed animal is cut up and the meat is arranged on a bed of fresh grass and clover. 'When he has made the proper arrangements, the Magus steps closer and sings the theogony, the genesis of the Gods.' The geographer Strabo, who lived several centuries later, repeatedly asserts that the Magi's hymns were still

sung during offerings, and the archaeologically minded Pausanias observed offerings being made to the Iranian gods in Lydian temples, accompanied by 'barbaric invocations which are unintelligible to the Greek'.

Herodotus's reference to a theogony recalls part of the Avesta, but only archaeological evidence may be cited in support of the proposition that Mithraists used a hymn which was already being sung in the time of Zarathustra and the Magi. Excavations of the Dieburg Mithraeum in 1926 brought to light a unique relief, dedicated by the two brothers Silvestrius Silvinus and Silvestrius Perpetus and a grandson Silvinius Aurelius, with an inscription stating that Perpetus was a cobbler and Silvinus a sculptor. Silvinus decorated the front and the back of the relief with fine carvings, and the stone was mounted on a pivot so that either side could be displayed during the sevice. It is with the subjects depicted on the back of the relief that we are principally concerned. The heads of the Wind-gods are represented in the four corners and the story of Phaëthon is shown enclosed in a circle, a symbol of the celestial vault (Fig. 66). The youth Phaëthon, whose name signifies 'the shining one', comes to ask his father Helios to allow him to drive the sun chariot for just one day. Helios, sitting on a throne placed in front of the entrance to his palace, grants Phaëthon's request, and four youths, speedy Wind-gods, lead out the four horses of Helios's quadriga in different directions. Four women, possibly personifications of the seasons, surround the throne, and at the base of the relief we see Oceanus, a goddess with a jar to represent the element of water and another with a horn of plenty to represent the earth (Fig. 38).

Cumont has given a most ingenious explanation of the Mithraic significance of this myth, which, not sur-

prisingly, is also represented in Nero's Palace of the Sun at Rome. According to the poet Nonnus, writing at the end of the fourth century A.D., Mithras was 'the Assyrian

Fig. 66. The back of a relief depicting the myth of Phaëthon

Phaëthon in Persia', and elsewhere he refers to Mithras and Phaëthon in the same breath. Nor was he the first to note the connection, for the orator Dio Chrysostom (xxxvi, 39) quotes a hymn supposedly sung by the Magi 'in secret mysteries'. This hymn brings out the relationship with Phaëthon, whom Zeus struck with a thunderbolt in order to prevent the complete destruction of the earth by fire. But Dio, whose journeys through Asia

Minor in about A.D. 100 brought him into contact with the Magi, relates a different version of the story: the supreme god drives a chariot drawn by four horses, which symbolise the elements and move on a continuous circular course. The outside horse is the swiftest and represents fire itself; the second gallops less speedily and symbolises the air; the third symbolises water and the fourth revolves like the earth on its own axis, while the other three move around it. This circular course was kept for a considerable time until at a given moment the breath of the furthest horse set fire to the other animals. The earth-horse's hair, which represented vegetation, burst into flames, the team of horses perished, and the fire-raising horse was reunited with the charioteer. It is as if an artist had created the horses in wax, and subsequently melted them down in order to create one single new shape out of all this material.

The moment when the outermost horse sets fire (*ἆσθμα ἰσχυρὸν*) to the hair of the earth-horse may be compared with Phaëthon's unhappy adventure when a similar disaster is brought about by the horse representing water, drops of whose sweat cause the flood. But both disasters are previews of the ultimate end of the world and the followers of Plato and the Stoa interpreted the inexperienced youthful charioteer Phaëthon as a harbinger of the future, of the wondrous conflagration (*conflagratio*, *ἐκπύρωσις*). The term *ἆσθμα* used by Dio for the fire-horse is found in the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos (compare p. 148) and there is also a possible allusion to the final conflagration in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum, where (compare p. 176) one line of verse records that the faithful will be consumed by the Lions who burn incense and symbolise fire.

The Dieburg relief proves, then, that the Mithraists

believed that their god contrived the conflagration, and in this belief they were following the Magi of Asia Minor who identified Mithras with Phaëthon as early as the Hellenistic period.

19

New Texts from Santa Prisca

It will be recalled that about A.D. 200 the members of the Mithraic sanctuary on the Aventine renovated and enlarged their temple and in so doing covered the original paintings with a layer of stucco and painted new frescoes over them. At the end of the fourth century A.D. the Christians wrecked the sanctuary and partially destroyed the paintings, which still show the sharp slashes of their axes, particularly on the left-hand wall. Ironically, however, it is thanks to this outrage that we are now able to read some of the underlying texts. When the paintings were first exposed during the excavations some letters became faintly visible through the top layer; as work progressed these letters became words and after careful removal of the top layer and patient examination they proved to be lines of verse. Such documentation is of extreme rarity since there is an almost entire absence of any other contemporary writings on Mithraic ritual. Only a partial summary can be made here of some of the lines, but a more detailed account of the complete material will be given in the forthcoming publication of the Dutch excavations in the sanctuary.

All the lines of the texts are in metrical form, mostly in

hexameters or pentameters, but in a few cases an iambic senarius is used. The texts were painted at comparatively regular distances from each other, if at times somewhat roughly aligned, and the letters are of equal height. On one occasion a letter was omitted and the painter subsequently added it above the word. Occasionally there are two or three lines which appear to follow each other but which nevertheless do not form a sequence, and these may be quotations from hymns or poems whose full content would be well known to the initiates. It is also possible that only the initial lines of the hymns were recorded, but proof is naturally difficult and a single line could be an odd quotation or it could be specially composed for this sanctuary.

Some texts give general directions for a way of life, others set out the teachings or the deeds of the god. Like the Stoic philosophy, the Mithraic cult had much to say on the subject of the practical and everyday problems of coexistence; these are the circumstances in which men need support and the cult of Mithras had to provide such guidance:

Nubila per ritum ducatis tempora cuncti.

Together you must sustain clouded times through service.

Mutual aid, the alleviation of the distress of others, observation of humanitarian principles as becomes brethren in one and the same service; the whole '*per ritum*', through the service of the cult with its manifold and rich symbolism.

The gravity of life is brought into prominence:

Dulcia sunt ficata avium sed cura gubernat.

Sweet are the livers of birds, but pain governs.

Chicken livers can still be found on the menu of an

Italian *trattoria* today; they count as a great delicacy and add much to the pleasures of a good meal. But amid these ephemeral delights are the cares and troubles of this life or, as Horace expressed it (*Carm.*, III, 1, 40), *post equitem sedet atra cura*, 'behind the rider sits black care.' The cult itself was austere and simple. Its sanctuaries never developed into great temples; they never became luxurious and were never adorned with great pomp and splendour. The follower of Mithras, even if he were of substantial means in his private life, donned simple clothes as a member of the cult and endeavoured first and foremost to perfect himself as a human being and to prepare himself for the life hereafter. It is probably this attitude which is at the root of the following line:

Primus et hic aries restrictius ordine currit.

Here also the ram walks in front, strictly in line.

The flock, led by the ram, represents the community guided by the Father, and he walks strictly in line. The word *ordo* means line or file and the expression *in ordine currere* means 'to walk in line', a disposition which at once calls to mind *milites*, soldiers in a campaign led by their officers. In the cult Mithras fills the post of supreme commander. The word *currere* actually means 'to run', but it is counterbalanced by *restrictius*, 'more restricted'. Moderation and self-control are the distinction of all Mithras's soldiers, both high and low.

Beside the quotations which have just been noted, there are some further lines of verse which give the impression of coming from formal hymns. One such is as follows:

Fecunda tellus cuncta qua generat Pales

The fertile land where Pales creates all.

Here, as with the offering of the *suovetaurilia* (see p. 50),

we enter the domain of Roman state religion. *Pales* is an ancient Roman goddess whose name has been connected with the Palatine hill, the original site of the *urbs aeterna*, as recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed. The 'Palilia' or 'Parilia' were celebrated on April 21st in honour of Pales and this day is still held to be the anniversary of the foundation of Rome. Ovid describes at length (*Fasti*, IV, 721-862) the ancient rites which were still being celebrated in his own day. After describing the invocation to the goddess, the poet relates the customs observed at the festival and the methods of purification. On the eve of the celebrations the sheep and their pens had to be cleansed, and the pens were decorated with greenery and fumigated with sulphur. On the day itself the statue of the goddess was sprinkled with luke-warm milk. Prayers were addressed to her as 'she who nourishes' and the first request was for forgiveness of transgressions, followed by others for health and prosperity for men and cattle alike: 'May hostile hunger be absent, may there be herbs and grasses in plenty.' This prayer had to be intoned four times while facing the east. Then the suppliant leapt over a blazing fire and was cleansed with water. Ovid gives various explanations of these customs, including a suggested connection of this purification by fire and water with Phaëthon (see p. 169) and Deucalion, i.e. with the first conflagration and the great flood. The rites of Pales, goddess of fertility, could be adopted into the Mithraic cult in the same way as the *suovetaurilia*. Pales, like Mithras, gave fertility to the world; the purification by fire and water, the comparison with Phaëthon, would all facilitate this process, and so we see the Mithraists celebrating the Pales festival in their temples in their own particular way.

The line just quoted stands at the head of the inscriptions on the wall of the Aventine chapel. It is tempting to regard these lines as running in sequence and offering a reflection on the course of the world. The two last lines, painted on the extreme right of the same wall, read as follows:

Accipe, thuricremos, pater, accipe, sancte, leones

Receive, Father, holy one, receive the incense-bearing Lions.

Per quos thuradamus per quos consumimur ipsi

Through whom we offer incense, through whom we ourselves are consumed.

The Father of the sanctuary, Mithras's deputy, who is described as *sanctus*, holy, sacred, is invoked to 'receive' or accept into his cult a group of people who call themselves Lions. The Lions were, as we have seen, an important grade in the Mithraic cult and in the temple of Santa Prisca especially, a number of them have been portrayed, symbolising the element of fire, burning incense and bringing the burnt offering to Mithras. We are forcefully reminded of the relief from Erghili (Dascylium) where the Magi who present the burnt offering keep their mouths covered in order not to contaminate the fire with their breath (see p. 20 and Fig. 1). The '*quos*' of the second quotation are then the Leones through whom the other initiates offer incense and through whom the community is consumed by fire. When at the end of time all are engulfed in the universal conflagration (as symbolised in the myth of Phaëthon) and so purified, the righteous and just will be reunited with the Eternal Light, the *Lux Perpetua*, the Sun, Mithras. Just as incense burns with a propitious aroma, so will mankind, acting the part of the

Marble head of Sarapis from the Walbrook Mithraeum

Marble group from the Walbrook Mithraeum, representing Dionysus with a Satyr, a Maenad and Silenus riding a donkey

incense and the candles (compare the Lion bearing candles on p. 49), be consumed and attain the aroma of 'sanctity'. This whole idea is clearly influenced by Stoic thought, which regarded the return to the Light as a termination of the burdens of life, and it is not surprising that the Mithraists erected in Athens a sculpture to the Stoic Chrysippus.

These heavy burdens! How brilliantly the labours of Herakles have been described by Festugière in his book *La Sainteté*. Zeus and Eurystheus, who acted under his instructions, did not lightly spare this son of a god. He is ὁ πολλὰ τλᾶς, he who has endured much. Like πολύτλας Odysseus he became what he was through his own unaided efforts (πόνοι); he became an unforgettable hero, a shining example to men. Herakles united in himself πόνος and λόγος: 'Héraclès les symbolisait l'une et l'autre. Héraclès n'est pas un savant. Il n'est pas instruit dans les livres. Il n'eut pour maîtresse que la douleur: τῷ παθεῖ μάθος. Mais il s'est conquis lui-même, il a surmonté son destin. Il le domine, il se domine; voilà le héros et le sage' (Festugière, *op. cit.* p. 47).

To endure these heavy burdens the Stoic philosophers and Epicurus tell us that to practise virtue (ἀρετή) is to be good (καλός). Mithras dragged the bull back to the cave (*transitus*) and thus accomplished the salvation of men:

Et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso

Us too you have saved by shedding blood which grants eternity.

The Soldier (*Miles*), who has entered Mithras's service (*militia*) after taking the oath (*sacramentum*), carries the heavy pack (*sarcina*) on his back during the long march through life. He undergoes acts of sheer drudgery in following the god and acting in his service; he follows him,

who *humeris portavit iuvencum*—'bore the young bull on his shoulders'. But all these ordeals lead eventually to deliverance: '*Le héros est un juste, et cependant il souffre. Mais cette épreuve porte fruit*' (Festugière, p. 68).

The term *militia*, military service, is common in Stoic writings and in many cults of Hellenistic origin. The initiation ceremony recruits into the cohorts of the particular god or goddess believers who offer themselves as a kind of voluntary slave to the deity of their choice, often only after receiving a divine summons. The High Priest of the cult of Isis, who not without reason is called Mithras, speaks to Lucius (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 15):

> You are now received into the protection of Fortune, but Fortune who can see and who with the splendour of her light illuminates even the other gods. Now put on a more cheerful countenance, appropriate to this white garment of yours. Join the following of the Goddess your deliverer with triumphant step. Let the irreligious see, let them see and recognise their error, saying, 'Look how Lucius, freed from his former miseries and rejoicing in the providence of great Isis, triumphs over his ill fortune'. But that you may be safer and better protected, enrol your name in this holy militia in whose allegiance you will hereafter rejoice, and now dedicate yourself to the service of our religion and voluntarily submit to the yoke of its ministry. For when you have begun to serve the Goddess you will then even more appreciate the fruits of your liberty.

The same spirit prevails in this line from the Aventine:

> *Atque perlata humeris tuli maxima divum.*
>
> And I bore the instructions of the gods on my shoulders to sustain till the end.

Lucius, the initiate of Isis, was to be enabled by the wonderful instructions of the gods (*mirificis imperiis deum*:

Apuleius, XI, 29) to behold and experience the pleasure of the supreme god Osiris, the *maximorum regnator*, the ruler of the Most High. Equally the follower of Mithras was to be admitted into Mithras's fierce light when, like Herakles or Mithras himself, he had ultimately carried out the mission entrusted to him by his god.

Thus Christ bore the Cross up to Calvary and said: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (*Matthew*, 11, 29-30). And Paul, pursuing this image (Romans 6, 19-23), wrote:

> As you once dedicated your members to the service of vice and lawlessness, so now dedicate them to the service of righteousness that means consecration. When you served sin you were free of righteousness. Well what did you gain then by it all? Nothing but what you are now ashamed of! The end of all that is death; but now that you are set free from sin, now that you have passed into the service of God, your gain is consecration, and the end of that is life eternal. Sin's wage is death, but God's gift is life eternal in Christ Jesus our Lord (*Moffat translation*).

Finally, there is one more line to be discussed. It relates to the initiation of the Lions and is written on the right-hand wall of the temple:

> *Nama Leonibus novis et multis annis*
> Hail, Lions, for new and many years.

The word *nama* is of Persian origin and is repeatedly found in Mithraic inscriptions; it means 'hail'. At a first glance this could be a New Year's greeting for the Lions, but why should it apply to the Lions only? An inscription from Athens of *c.* A.D. 165 offers a solution. This inscription was found in a large room divided into three aisles by

two rows of columns. The east side contained an apse in which a number of altars and sculptures were found. The inscription shows that this was an assembly hall of a Dionysiac community. Furthermore, we are able to learn how a new High Priest was elected and how new statutes were laid down. When the chairman Rufus had asked those present to raise their hands in agreement to the proposals, they were recorded as saying: 'May the excellent priest Herodos for many years (discharge his duties).' This same pious wish persits in the formula by which a new Roman Emperor was acclaimed at the imperial court by Senate and people in the hope that, if the Emperor were to be allotted a long life, all would be well with the people during his reign. In later times homage came to be paid in this form to a new Pope after his election, and this form of blessing, still used by the Church today, seems to have been pronounced during the initiation of the Lions of the Mithraic cult.

Thus we find ourselves back again in the Mithraeum of Santa Prisca where, on the bottom layer of the right-hand wall, we find this very prayer together with the procession of Lions bringing offerings for their initiatory celebrations.

20

Offerings and Artists: Mithras in Art

THE great diversity of the followers of the Mithras cult is clearly revealed in the variation in the temples themselves and in the numerous gifts which were offered to the tutelary deity. Hidden in the mountains of the Italian

Alps, Southern France and Yugoslavia are a few simple sanctuaries where the standard cult scenes were carved in the living rock. High up in the mountains twenty-five miles north-west of the Rumanian Black Sea town of Constanza, a natural grotto was fitted out as a Mithraeum with, next to primitive altars, a magnificent relief executed by the artist Nicomedeus, and presented by a senior tax official (see plate opposite p. 129). At Ostia the Athenian sculptor Kriton created a wonderful group with Mithras as bull-slayer, portrayed in the full grandeur of the Greek style. At Leptis Magna in Tripolitania the torch-bearers were executed in marble by one Aristius Antiochus, while at Merida in Spain a certain Demetrius created a most original sculpture of Mithras standing with a dolphin at his feet. In the second century B.C. a whole group of artists established a workshop in Köenigshoffen near Strasbourg, lured there by the hope of benefiting from the presence of the legions and the cult of their patron Mithras. This school did not confine its products to the Mithraea of Köenigshoffen and Mackwiller, for its distinctive statuary is encountered throughout the surrounding districts.

The painted Mithraea in Rome and Ostia are the most renowned, but temple paintings have been found in Capua and even at Dura on the Euphrates. The Ostia Mithraea are even better known for their mosaics in black and white marble, set in the floor and on the reclining benches, which illustrate symbolically the teachings of Mithras. At Poetovio and Stockstadt silversmiths (*argentarii*) were employed to depict the motif of the bull-slaying on small silver plates, and gems engraved with representations of Mithras (Fig. 67) are also known. Santa Prisca had a head of the Sun-god in lead with a cut-out halo (see plate

opposite p. 112), and in this same Mithraeum various artists were employed at different times to adorn the cult niche with stucco work. Germany and Austria are

Fig. 67. Gem showing a Mithraic scene

particularly well known for their large snake-vases and only recently a pot from the Central Gaulish *terra sigillata* factories at Lezoux came to light, bearing a representation of the bull-slaying (Fig. 68). Finally, a small *terra sigillata* vessel was found at Trier decorated with a portrayal of the sacred meal.

A closer examination of these objects shows that the artist did not always grasp the spirit of the commission, and indeed—as is the case of Kriton at Ostia—he sometimes allowed his own personal whim to take complete control.

Whether a monument was infused with a deep symbolism or not depended on the degree of education of the members of the community or of the artist employed. In most

Fig. 68. *Terra sigillata* pot with a representation of Mithras

cases the Father of the Community seems to have exercised a decisive influence on the general furnishing of the sanctuary, but the actual execution of the plans was in some regions governed by very unfavourable conditions, and limited finances often had the last word. But if circumstances permitted the temple would be ornamented in certain ways. Sometimes the dominant motif was surrounded by dozens of votive images of the bull-slaying, as

at Sarmizegetusa, or by lamps and candelabra, or alternatively a painted or embroidered veil might be hung in front of the cult niche, *deum in velo formatum*, as we learn from an inscription at Ostia. But the Mithraeum was never luxurious; even in Rome, where some statues were decorated with gold leaf, the temple of Mithras preserved its austere and simple character, as befitted the god who was worshipped there.

In comparing the hundreds of Mithraic representations spread over the Empire, we can distinguish certain underlying traditions. As we have seen, the commonest type of representation, the bull-slaying in a vaulted cave, occurs on a relief from Yugoslavia (Fig. 69), as well as in Rome and other parts of the Empire. This type, which was sometimes highly stylised, originated with an artist who may have lived under the Empire and was certainly influenced by a Hellenistic school. There is an exceptionally interesting relief showing the victorious Mithras with Phrygian cap and crown standing on the bull, his right foot triumphantly planted on the animal's head while in his left hand he holds a globe or pine-cone and in his right hand a dagger pointing upwards (see plate opposite p. 48). At his side are a scorpion, the raven, a lion, a crowing cock, an ant and an eagle on a thunderbolt. This image of the god trampling an animal underfoot was so widespread in Asia Minor that it also came to be associated with Mithras. It did not, however, become generally popular since normally the bull-slayer, symbolic of the moment of the rebirth of nature, remained the focal point.

Rome was by no means the sole source of artistic inspiration, though certain representations were found there which are not encountered elsewhere. The procession of Lions on the side walls of Santa Prisca is a

singular phenomenon and adds a touch of local colour to the normal iconography. A relief from Konjic (Fig. 36), which gives a vivid portrayal of one of the most sacred

Fig. 69. Mithras as bull slayer

moments in the ritual, is again quite unique in its conception. Representations of hunting scenes are mainly confined to the Rhineland, although they appear at Dura on the Euphrates, but there are none in Rome. This type probably spread directly from Asia Minor to the Rhineland, which also produced various regional schools of art of its own. The larger reliefs enriched with various additional scenes came from these regions and are shaped

like triumphal arches. They are not found in the Danube countries and only one instance occurs in Rome, on a painting in the Barberini Mithraeum, which was probably therefore executed under the influence of Rhenish art.

Other types again are encountered in Rumania and Bulgaria and are confined to these countries. If an example of this type turns up elsewhere one may reasonably assume that it originated in Dacia, particularly if it is a small arched relief depicting a number of scenes from the Mithras legend on its upper and lower borders. The scenes on the lower edge are usually divided from each other by arches. The Danube region is characterised by trapeziform reliefs with miscellaneous scenes grouped around the bull-slayer and on the narrow bands above and below. No examples of circular reliefs have been found in Rome, but they are known in Yugoslavia (at Salona) and in Hungary (Brigetio), and in one isolated case in Bulgaria.

There was therefore considerable diversity in the type and style of the monument. The artist was given full liberty to work as he wished, on occasion following a completely local tradition, and it is often possible to see that he did not attend too closely to the instructions of his commission and consequently understood little of the symbolism which his products were intended to portray.

21

The Fall of Mithras

In the third century A.D. the worship of Mithras had spread so widely within the Roman Empire that its

position was able to survive the emergence of Persia as a competitor of Rome in the political and military field. Interest in the Eastern deities was encouraged by the kinship between the Roman emperors and the Syrian dynasty.

The attraction of the mystery cults was that through their initiation ceremonies one established a personal relationship with the god of one's own choice. The oriental cults laid great stress on personal salvation during life and after death. For anyone who feels the attraction of this oriental way of thought, but dislikes its more exotic manifestations, the teachings of Mithras have considerable appeal. The search for a monotheistic cult stimulated by the philosophical doctrines of the time led inevitably to the all-embracing cult of the unvanquished Sun-god. The extent of this sun-worship can be seen in the hostility which met the attempt of the young Syrian Emperor Heliogabalus in the year A.D. 210 to import a representation of the god Baal from Emesa to Rome; the Romans were still too much attracted to the traditional conception of the sun to be able to accept Baal in the shape of a black stone.

Aurelian built a large temple to the Sun in the Campus Martius, part of which is now the Piazza San Silvestro. There he worshipped the Sun-god as the only heavenly, almighty and divine power. It was decreed that every four years celebrations were to be held in honour of this new state god and the cult acquired a priestly college of its own. The anniversary of the Sun-god's birth was on December 25th.

Understandably the Mithraic cult took advantage of this favour. We have seen how in A.D. 307 or 308 Diocletian, together with the other imperial rulers, dedicated an altar to Mithras, 'the benefactor of the Empire', during a

conference at Carnuntum on the borders of the Roman Empire (see p. 58). The fact that Mithras is mentioned by name distinguishes this dedication from the more general sun-cult of Aurelian.

The influence of the Mithraic cult was at its height during this period and for a short time indeed it looked as if it might reign supreme. An attempt was made to accord Mithras the place of honour on the Capitol. Naturally, it is impossible to tell whether, if its advances had not been stemmed by Christianity, Mithraism could ever have achieved complete dominance. The often quoted opinion of Renan in his book on Marcus Aurelius is too sweeping: 'Si le christianisme eut été arrêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eut été mithraiste.'

The battle at the Milvian Bridge on the Tiber (A.D. 312) was decisive not only for Constantine but also for the Mithraic cult. The vision of the symbol of Christ brought victory to Constantine, as on a previous occasion when the Sun-god appeared to Aurelian to pledge his support for the Emperor against Zenobia. It was due to Aurelian that the sun-cult was proclaimed the official state religion of Rome; now, similarly convinced, Constantine firmly planted the Cross on Roman soil.

The religion of the Romans, as Bayet so rightly remarks, always developed within the framework of their politics: 'therein lies the most surprising originality of its development'. H. Doerries, the biographer of Constantine, considers it anachronistic even to pose the question how far Constantine's official and public arguments in favour of the adoption of Christianity corresponded with his own personal thoughts and sentiments. According to him, 'politics were for him determined by religion, and religion was the consequence of politics'.

The second half of the fourth century was decisive for the outcome of the struggle between Christianity and paganism. The unwillingness of the Emperor Julian to conform to his rigid Christian upbringing led to his being named the Apostate. Strongly under the influence of the neo-platonic school, with an inclination towards the mystical, Julian declared himself a convinced Mithraist– and we should stress the word convinced, for the fourth century produced many sympathisers, but few true followers of Mithras. J. Bidez, who has written a fine biography of Julian, describes him in glowing terms as the last emperor who professed the Mithraic faith. Julian recognised that if Mithraism were to become the world religion, it had to discard many of its more primitive aspects and be prepared to assimilate more philosophical elements, a consideration which must have contributed to those signs of the mysticism of Iamblichus which appear in the Emperor's own 'Hymn to the Sun'. Mithras is the Sun and is one and the same with Apollo, Phaëthon, Hyperion and Prometheus. The other gods merely express different aspects of the power of the sun. Julian saw himself in the rôle of a good shepherd, whose moral code was laid down by Mithras: 'Goodness towards the people he had to rule, piety towards the gods and moderation' (Julian, *Caes.*, 356 C). From the moment that he was initiated in a Mithraeum at Constantinople and entered into the highest grade of the cult he did everything in his power to encourage the triumph of the Mithraic cult, but his life was cut short by an arrow during his expedition against the Persian King Shapur. After his death in A.D. 363 a period of comparative tolerance set in, but this was cut short by an edict of the Emperor Gratian in A.D. 382. The altar of Victory was removed from the Senate, and

state support for the upkeep of the Roman cult was withdrawn (see p. 155). Gratian was in A.D. 379 the first emperor to refuse the high dignity and title of *pontifex maximus*. Shortly before this (A.D. 377) the city prefect Gracchus had, according to Hieronymus (in his letter *Ad Laetam* 107), overturned, broken and destroyed (*subvertit, fregit, excussit*) a cave of Mithras filled with monstrous images (*portentosa simulacra*). We do not know exactly which Mithraic temple this was; de Rossi thought it might be the sanctuary at San Silvestro. Be that as it may, the traces of such an iconoclastic act are clearly visible in the temple of Santa Prisca.

Gratian found himself in opposition to a group of prominent intellectuals. These can be divided into two groups, one of which wished to follow the example of Julian and the other to support the gods whose existence, according to Altheim, was founded 'not in their being gods, but in their being gods of Rome'. Both groups, however, worked closely together against Gratian. Their leaders included Vettius Agorius Praetextatus who restored the Porticus Deorum Consentium with the statues of the twelve gods at the Forum. He occupied various priestly offices and was Father of Fathers in the cult of Mithras. Praetextatus was a faithful follower of Julian's ideas, while his successor and friend Q. Aurelius Symmachus was a staunch conservative. Verius Nicomachus Flavianus, a cousin of Symmachus, who was later to carry on the final struggle, was punished by the emperor in A.D. 377 because of his support of the Donatists in Africa. Various important inscriptions by Alfenius Ceionius Julianus Kamenius, a cousin of the Emperor Julian, show his faith in Mithras. Included in this circle of aristocrats and scholars was the author Macrobius who referred to the doctrine of the

pagan world in his Saturnalia. Symmachus, an able diplomatist, took upon himself the thankless task of remonstrating with Gratian about his decision. Whereupon Ambrose, bishop of Milan, threatened the young Emperor with excommunication. The protagonists, however, were not Gratian and Symmachus but their respective associates Ambrose and Praetextatus, and when the latter died in A.D. 385 he left his party without a leader.

The struggle moved slowly to its close after the accession of Theodosius. When Christians in Syria looted and burned a synagogue, and monks set fire to a temple of the gnostic Valentinians, Theodosius demanded restitution and punishment. But again Ambrose intervened and Theodosius yielded. However much he struggled for independence, he ultimately became, in the words of Herbert Bloch, the 'spiritual subject of Ambrose'. He was excommunicated after another incident, but at Christmas in the year A.D. 390 the bishop allowed him to attend communion once more.

An edict of February 37th, A.D. 391 forbade all pagan worship in Rome and all visits to pagan temples (*Cod. Theod.*, XVI, 10, 10), and shortly after this a beautiful Serapeum in Alexandria was destroyed (Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.*, XI, 22-30). The final edict was issued on November 8th of the following year (392); all practice of pagan religions, private devotions included, was to be severely punished (*Cod. Theod.*, XVI, 10, 12). But even now the supporters of the opposition refused to admit defeat. Flavianus, who had become the leader of the resistance, declared for Eugenius, who was in the north of Italy preparing for battle against Theodosius. The contest became a question of 'to be or not to be' for the old religion. At first it looked as though the battle by the

Frigidus would bring victory to Jupiter. Then the next morning Theodosius knelt down and prayed. A storm swept up from the Adriatic and the arrows of the pagan enemy were turned back upon them. Yet again a miracle determined the outcome. Eugenius was murdered and Flavianus committed suicide.

For many years the spiritual struggle continued, causing Augustine to write his *City of God* in order to refute the imputation that the scorn shown to the Roman gods was to blame for the sack of Rome by the Goths.

It is possible that the worship of Mithras survived here and there in more isolated regions, but the power of the unvanquished god was shattered. He was conquered by the spirit of the new age and his cult perished. It is left to present-day scholarship to solve the mysteries and to seek out those secrets which the god took with him in his eclipse.

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